

A FISTFUL OF LOVE

WISDOM AND HUMOUR
FROM A MONK'S BOWL



O M S W A M I

JAICO

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM

A FISTFUL OF LOVE

WISDOM AND HUMOUR
FROM A MONK'S BOWL



O M S W A M I

JAICO

A FISTFUL OF LOVE

WISDOM AND HUMOUR
FROM A MONK'S BOWL

O M S W A M I



JAICO PUBLISHING HOUSE

Ahmedabad Bangalore Bhopal Bhubaneswar Chennai
Delhi Hyderabad Kolkata Lucknow Mumbai

Published by Jaico Publishing House
A-2 Jash Chambers, 7-A Sir Phirozshah Mehta Road
Fort, Mumbai - 400 001
jaicopub@jaicobooks.com
www.jaicobooks.com

© Om Swami

A FISTFUL OF LOVE
ISBN 978-81-8495-792-1

First Jaico Impression: 2015

No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Page design and layout: Jojy Philip, Delhi

Yāvatī dyāvāpṛthivī varimṇā yāvadāpaḥ siśyaduryāvadagniḥ |

Tatasatvamasi jyāyān viśvahā mahānstasmai tē kāma nama it kṛṇōmi ||

Greater than earth and heaven, bigger than oceans, brighter than fire, You,
O Love, are the greatest and mightiest of all,
My obeisance to the innate love in all beings.

– *Atharva Veda* 9.2.20.

Contents

1. [Foreword](#)
2. [What Are You Made Of?](#)
3. [Problem or Inconvenience?](#)
4. [A Meaningful Life](#)
5. [Harmony in a Relationship](#)
6. [A Random Act of Kindness](#)
7. [The Law of the Land](#)
8. [The Most Fundamental Human Desire](#)
9. [Sex and Spirituality](#)
10. [What Do You Really Want?](#)
11. [Secret to Happiness](#)
12. [What Is Beautiful?](#)
13. [Speaking the Language of Love](#)
14. [Love or Attachment?](#)
15. [What Is Love?](#)

16. [The Value of Love](#)
17. [The Secret to Healthy Relationships](#)
18. [Living with Love](#)
19. [Why Do People Cheat?](#)
20. [The DNA of Desires](#)
21. [The Desire Tree](#)
22. [When They Don't Love You Back](#)
23. [Why Do People Love or Hate You](#)
24. [Four Pillars of an Everlasting Relationship](#)
25. [Four Truths of Marriage](#)
26. [When to Move Out of a Relationship?](#)
27. [The Path of Personal Fulfillment](#)
28. [What Is the Meaning of Life?](#)
29. [A Lost World](#)
30. [Three Most Important Questions](#)
31. [Living a Life of Dreams](#)
32. [Bottled Up?](#)
33. [Destiny and Free Will](#)
34. [Why Do People Change?](#)
35. [Give or Take?](#)

36. [A Strange World](#)
37. [The Successful and the 'Successfool'](#)
38. [The Practice of Tolerance](#)
39. [A Life of Lies](#)
40. [Life Is a Struggle](#)
41. [The Question Paper of Life](#)
42. [A Sky Full of Love](#)
43. [When Will My Bad Time End?](#)
44. [The Greatest Spiritual Quality.](#)
45. [Happiness Is a Journey.](#)
46. [The Eternal Truth](#)
47. [The Greatest Fear](#)
48. [How Did We Happen?](#)
49. [Making Dreams Come True](#)
50. [Do You Have Faith?](#)
51. [The Two Realizations](#)

Foreword

Once upon a time, Buddha was walking along a riverside with nine of his disciples. In his quiet and graceful manner, the sage was talking to Ananda about mindfulness when suddenly almost all the monks stopped in their tracks and looked the other way, across the river, in great awe. A yogi was crossing the waters and coming towards them. Ordinarily, this would not have been a distracting sight. Especially, considering that Buddha was delivering a sermon on mindfulness. This yogi, however, was not crossing the river in a boat; he wasn't even swimming across; he was simply walking on water.

The monks couldn't contain their surprise, and interrupting Buddha, they said, "Do you see that, Lord? This is a miracle of miracles. That yogi must be a siddha too."

Buddha remained unimpressed and choosing not to answer their question, he kept walking. All but Ananda stayed behind.

As soon as the yogi crossed over, the monks fell at his feet to seek his blessings.

"Tell us, O Perfected One," they spoke, "how did you attain the supernatural power of walking on water? Can we too walk on it like you?"

The yogi beamed with pride. "Yes, you can," he answered.

"If you tread my path with discipline for 20 years, you too can walk on water like me."

"Twenty years!" They exclaimed in unison. Their enthusiasm died right away. *Who on earth would have the tenacity to lead an austere life for 20 years? The payoff was attractive, no doubt, but two decades of discipline was too big a price to pay.* Two of them joined the yogi nevertheless while

the rest offered their obeisance quickly and ran towards Buddha who was now quietly and gently walking towards a boatman.

"O Sage!" they said, "that great yogi said we can walk on water by practicing austerities for 20 years. It was very impressive indeed. But, we thought you must know of an easier method."

Buddha paused for a moment, looked at their excited faces with his perfected gaze, and resumed walking.

"Will you take us across the river, O noble man?" he requested the boatman.

"Yes, sir," he replied, "but, it will cost you a fistful of rice."

They agreed and boarded the boat. In the middle of the river, Buddha broke his silence. "That is all it is worth, my spiritual sons," he said. "That great yogi's 20 years of austerities are worth a fistful of rice."

The monks dropped their heads in shame. No, not because they were impressed with the yogi, that was natural. They felt ashamed because just one simple distraction could make them forgo their master.

"You have to choose," continued Buddha, "you have to make choices in life, monks. Everything depends on your choices and subsequent actions. You can hanker after some powers to impress a few or you can lead a life of meaning and help everyone in the universe. It is entirely up to you."

"Forgive us, Tathāgata, for our mistake. We don't deserve to be your disciples because we witnessed just one *siddhi* and called that yogi Perfected One too."

Buddha maintained his silence. When they got off the boat, Ananda handed the boatman his dues – a fistful of rice.

There are many such disciples among us. We notice one good quality in someone we just met and forget about those who stood by us all along. We are eager to put the new person on the same pedestal as our near and dear

ones. In doing so, we forget the years of care, bond, and memories we created with our loved ones. We forsake the wise, selfless Buddha for a fancy display of power by a newcomer, someone we just met.

It works the same way in relationships too. When a man or a woman talks to you nicely, pays you some attention for a few minutes, you go home and tell your partner how nice this person was and how he should aim to be like your new acquaintance. By acting this way, we reduce their years of effort to a mere handful of rice. Most of us, like Buddha's disciples, are forever getting impressed with the *siddhis* of other yogis and asking Buddha to behave like them.

I am not talking just about the disciples. Many of us, like the yogi in the story, spend our entire life working on stuff worth no more than a fistful of rice – ignoring the sermon of love, disregarding our personal happiness, trampling over our emotional needs, at the cost of our health – we are working hard to gain, to attain, to be.

Most of our actions, I may add, stem from our need to impress those who don't matter to us, those who care the least about us, to gain the attention of those for whom it will never be good enough. Even worse, we indulge in such behaviour at the expense of those who actually do matter.

We work hard so we can be happy; so we may share that happiness with our loved ones. Although, in working hard, in winning the race, we often lose sight of why we are doing it in the first place. Two people come together with the intention of loving each other, with the hope of leading a life of happiness and sharing, but soon reality and practicalities give way to resistance, differences, disharmony, and love disappears like dew upon the morning sun.

Why is love such an elusive emotion? Why do people grow out of their relationships when once they had thought they wouldn't be able to live without the other person? In this book, based on a collection of my writings over the last few years, I address these issues and more.

Oft en we work towards big goals in life, but love is not made up of big things. Like everything on our planet, whether it is a Himalayan mountain

or a small ant, is made up of tiny elements called cells. Love too is shown in small gestures of affection, care, attention, belonging, appreciation, and mutual respect. Walk with me to understand love as I see it. Let's separate the chaff from the actual seeds with the knowledge that the seeds for sowing are different from the seeds for consumption.

It may be a good moment to pause; to stop and take a good look at your life. Hopefully, whatever it is that you are working towards, however grand it may be, is worth more than a handful of rice. Conversely, maybe you don't need to lead an austere life, a life of stress and distress, of rush and rat race, because you can already attain the same outcome by parting with a fistful of rice.

Krishna too had granted the comforts of the world to Sudama for a small portion of rice. It wasn't just a handful of rice that compelled him though; it was but a fistful of love, Sudama's small offering of pure love. That's all it takes, a fistful of love to cultivate your field of relationships. Those seeds of love will one day be harvested and sowed back to grow into more and more and then some. It all starts with a meager sprinkle.

For some, a handful of rice is their life's worth; it is their whole world. And for some others, the whole world is worth no more than a handful of rice. It is a matter of understanding, a question of priorities, of perspective.

What is yours?

What Are You Made Of?

If we keep holding on to our burdens, it keeps getting heavier and once beyond bear, it makes us weak and vulnerable.

Let me tell you the story of an angry man. He had been married for two decades, yet he habitually fought with his wife. He suffered from uncontrollable fits of rage. Consumed by fury, he would say and do things he would regret later. He would get worked up over trivial matters. He hated himself for it and no matter how hard he tried, couldn't break his habit.

One day he approached his guru and said, "I'm sick and tired of being angry all the time. Tiny matters set me off and the fiend in me comes out without any warning. Why am I angry and upset all the time?"

"Because you are hurt," the guru answered.

"But, I've a caring family and I do love my wife. She doesn't hurt me back when I'm upset. So, I don't think I'm hurt."

"You are experiencing the pain of old wounds. These are the after effects of what you may have experienced in your childhood or during your youth."

"Have I not been healed all these years?" he asked.

"Not only you've not been healed, but the hurt and the pain have made you weak too. As a result, regardless of how pleasant or unpleasant the situation is, any undesirable thought or emotion triggers the anger in you. A fit of rage is a sign of being hurt and weak."

"But I don't remember any major incidents, only small ones. How can such experiences of the distant past still leave me weak, hurt, and angry?"

The guru handed him his water pot and instructed the man to keep his arm stretched while holding it.

"Is it heavy?" the guru asked.

"Not really."

A minute passed and he repeated the question.

"It feels a little heavier now," the disciple replied.

"Stay put till I say otherwise."

"My arm is aching and I can't hold it any longer," the man said after five minutes.

The guru took the water pot from him and said, "You see, it's not about the weight of the pot, but how long you carried it. The longer you hold it, the heavier it feels. Gradually, you feel weaker and weaker before you find it unbearable."

While the gravity of the incident matters, what matters more is how long we have been carrying it around. I frequently meet people who are in their 50s, 60s or even 70s, who have been married for decades, yet they complain about incidents that occurred 30 years ago as if they happened just 30 minutes back. Their issues range from something as small as not being served the right meal at their wedding to being lied to about something more serious.

Every day, every moment of our lives unfolds a new experience. It's impossible to have only pleasant experiences because often what we experience is dependent on how we are feeling internally at that moment than the absoluteness of the external condition itself. It's impossible to only have agreeable conversations with our loved ones. It's a given that there are going to be times when you or the other person will commit mistakes or you won't be able to understand each other. It doesn't mean that the relationship is not workable or that there is no compatibility between you

two. Sometimes, it simply means that you have been carrying the pot of water for a little too long.

It is for your own good that you try and let go before the tiny pebbles of petty matters become giant mountains of negativity. If we keep holding on, it keeps getting heavier and once the burden is beyond bear, it makes us weak and vulnerable. In that state of hurt and susceptibility, it takes less than a trifle to snap, just like a mere pin prick bursting a balloon.

I am not saying that you put up with abusive behavior. All I am suggesting is that no matter how small or big the incident, if you still hold the other person responsible for what happened years ago, you are doing great injustice to the both of you. It's unnecessary. It's past, it's gone. When the past hurt is weighing you down, you can't possibly hope to feel light or happy. What is more, we can't even remain sane if we don't let go. Albert Einstein once said, "Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance, you must keep moving."

The world around us will continue to move. We can't erase the past. We can't really change others unless they deeply desire it themselves. We can't go into the future. We can't forget anything by choice. We can, however, let go, we can empty ourselves. Let me share with you a beautiful Buddhist hymn.

*Let me a pure white lotus be
Unfolding in Samsara's stream,
Let all the gloom of misery
Be gathered in my lotus dream;
Let each dew drop that studded lie
On each white radiant fold,
Reflect the mercy of the law
That turns death's bliss to gold.*

*Let every wave that tumbles down,
Their curled slim of wrath, repair
To lotus roots of dusky brown,*

*In my compassion's bounty share;
Let every sparks of vengeance rowed
Round lotus stalks entwine.
And greed and lies transformed by love
In lotus heart enshrine.*

*When each life drop has sped away
Across my pure white lily door
When I have drained all sorrow may
I speed to deck that lustless floor.
Let every petal softly fold,
In summer's golden shine
Retreat to claim the splendid prize
Nirvana's joy last Mine!*

Retain only what you really care about because the stuff we keep inside is what shapes us.

What are you made of?

Problem or Inconvenience?

Life is a congregation of various colors; enjoy the mix. You can't have it all white or black.

A man in search of truth ended up at the monastery of a sage. He prostrated before the master and requested refuge. The sage told him he was happy to initiate him but there were certain rules the disciple would have to obey. "I want you to practice silence," the master said, "therefore, you are only allowed to speak once every 12 years, only one sentence of no more than five words."

The disciple readily agreed. For 12 years he tried to meditate and eagerly waited for his opportunity to speak.

"The bed is too hard," he told his guru at the first opportunity after 12 years.

"Hmm..." the master grumbled.

Another 12 years went by in silence and the disciple complained again, "The food is too cold."

"Hmm..." said the master.

The disciple felt angry but he did not want to break the rule. He meditated for another 12 years and said, "I am leaving." Exceeding the limit of five words he continued, "This is rubbish. I haven't gained anything, I haven't learned anything, and you haven't taught me anything."

"Good, be gone," the master replied. "All I have heard you do in the last 36 years is complain, complain, and complain! If silence could not teach you what else can? From whom can you learn, if you couldn't learn from life?"

Putting aside the humor, this anecdote may sound extreme, but it is not far from reality. A bulk of the emails I get are from people going through problems. Most people who visit me are somehow unhappy. They are complaining about life, about others, about things, circumstances, situations, etc.

While in the story above the disciple spoke only three times, but in every likelihood, he complained in his head a million times more. I call this cerebral complaining. Many do this all the time. They are almost always complaining in their mind, even in their dreams.

I am reminded of a great story by author Robert Fulghum from his book *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. During his early 20s, Robert used to work for a countryside resort. He had to do the night shift as a receptionist and mind the stables during the day. The owner was not the most likable or the kindest person on the planet and Robert was getting weary of eating the same lunch every day. In addition, the cost of the lunch would get deducted from his pay check. It got on his nerves.

One night, he could hold it no longer, especially when he found out that the same lunch was going to be served for another couple of days. The night auditor Sigmund Wollman was a German Jew who survived the Auschwitz after spending three years at the concentration camp. He was happy and contented in the same hotel where Robert was mad and upset. Finding no one else around to share his frustration, Robert unloaded it on Sigmund and expressed his anger against the hotel owner. He was mad because of eating the same food day-in-day-out and for having to pay for it. Sigmund, however, listened patiently before saying:

"Lissen, Fulchum, Lissen me, lissen me. You know whats wrong with you? It's not the food and it's not the boss and it's not this job."

"So what's wrong with me?"

"Fulchum, you think you know everything but you don't know the difference between an inconvenience and a problem. If you break your neck, if you have nothing to eat, if your house is on fire – then you've got a

problem. Everything else is an inconvenience. Life is inconvenient. Life is lumpy."

Robert Fulghum had a realization and he further wrote in his story, "I think of this as the Wollman Test of Reality. Life is lumpy. And a lump in the porridge, a lump in the throat and a lump in the breast are not the same lump. One should learn the difference."

It is important to get real if you want to make the best of your life. You can keep complaining or you can start living. They say life is 90 percent how you take it and 10 percent how you make it. It is easy, perhaps even natural and normal that you hold others responsible for what all is not right in your life, but it will not take you anywhere. Such an approach will not solve your problems, it will not ease your concerns. Do not wait for someone else to take charge of your life. Analyse yourself, know yourself, treat yourself with care and love. While you may have responsibilities, do not be afraid of living for yourself too. All of that is possible only when you take the ownership of your life, when you take responsibility for the choices you make in life.

Understand yourself so you can get comfortable with the idea of you. Life will not feel so inconvenient thereafter. If you cannot make yourself happy, how can you reasonably expect others to make you happy? You alone hold the key to your happiness. Be free, be fearless.

A Meaningful Life

*In a machine, the smallest gear is as indispensable as the biggest one.
You are as important as anybody else.*

In 2012, I spent a week exploring the Himalayas. The goal was to identify a suitable place for my upcoming stint of solitude. I hired a car to take me around. The driver was also the owner of the car. He was a sober guy and a staunch follower of the religion he practiced. Staunch because his only collection of music was gospel and recitations of his holy book.

The gospel music was already playing in the car, as I took seat. I smiled and maintained it for longer than usual. Thereafter, I shed some light on the esoteric meaning of certain verses of his scripture. This encouraged him beyond a reasonable limit and as a result, that is all he played for the next few days. I politely asked him if we could occasionally listen to the hills and the vales, the cool breeze and the snowy peaks, the rivers and the waterfalls too. He was kind enough to turn off the music and I enjoyed the silence thereafter. I really believe religion is hard-wired, hopefully not hot-wired, in human psyche.

My driver-cum-car owner companion told me he was 60-years-old. He left home when he was nine and for many years he worked in a factory as a machine operator. He still does not own a home and is five instalments away from paying off his car loan, his only livelihood. After paying off his monthly instalment, rent and groceries, he is left with practically nothing. However, he possessed two outstanding qualities. One, he carried himself really well, almost dressed like a manager in some traditional corporate and two, he was generally very positive.

Striking a conversation, "I've no complaints," he said, "but there's a thought that bothers me a great deal. I feel I've wasted my entire life without attaining anything significant. I worked menial jobs all my life and

have not made any contribution to my religion, society or country, till date. Is this how life is supposed to be? Will my death be as obscured as my life? What bad karma did I commit in my past life to have a life like this?"

I paused for a few seconds to appreciate the depth of his thought before saying, "You know, a machine has many parts, big and small. It can't run on big cogs alone. All of them have a role to play. Similarly, your job is as important as anyone else's. The magnitude may seem to differ as compared to, let us say, a leader's or a politician's. But the importance doesn't. Any chain is as strong as its weakest link. So to the universe, you are just as somebody as anybody. Who would have shown me around if you wouldn't be in the job you are in?"

A teardrop appeared in the corner of his eye and quickly vanished in his beard. His exact words were, "It's the first time in my life I'm feeling warm inside, I'm feeling very content."

Later on, he told me something most extraordinary. "I was firm about remaining a bachelor. But a few years ago, I married a younger woman who was in great trouble. She had some anomaly because of which she could not have kids. She had no parents and lived with her sister and brother-in-law who treated her badly. So I married her." He continued, "Five years ago, we adopted a baby girl. At that time, her whole back was excessively sun burnt, as if she had skin cancer. She was only 45-days-old. I took her to my God and placed her there and prayed for her. In 15 days, she was totally cured." Emotions in the form of tears were liberally expressing themselves in his eyes by now.

He, like any other parent, enthusiastically gloated about his five-year-old daughter. His little girl wants to study abroad and even assures her poor father that she will pay for her studies by taking tuitions.

Though proud of his little daughter's wisdom, the cabbie had many worries about the future. "Will I be there when she goes to college? Will I be able to pay for her education? I don't have a lot of years left. Who will provide for her after I'm gone?" he asked. "Sometimes, I can't sleep when I think about these questions and then I pray to God and leave everything in his hands," he added. He cried silently all the while as he counted his woes.

My heart melted like butter on a hot plate. I checked my sentiments and holding back my own tears pacified the driver, for, you can imagine what chance does a car have of staying on the road if both the driver and the passenger starts crying.

I told him he is better than 99 percent of the people I meet, that his contribution to the society is far greater than most out there and this world is only worth living because of people like him. I promised him that he will never be without food, shelter, clothing, or medication. The providence cannot afford to not look after someone like him.

Here I wish to share two key lessons. First, anyone's work is as important as anyone else's. Second, you really do not need to have a lot to be able to give, you just need a heart. If you are reading this post, it probably means you have a computer with internet access and you can perhaps afford to take care of your basic needs. You are already in the top 20 percent of the world's population.

There are hundreds of millions out there who work painfully hard for a pittance. They consider themselves lucky to just have a square meal when the sun goes down. Many do not fall asleep because they are in cozy beds or because their stomach is full, they do so because their body can remain awake no more. For some, sleep is not just about resting, but also a way to forget about hunger, harshness of the world and to give a temporary rest to their endless suffering. All this before morning sounds scornfully play in their ears; before hard reality caresses their eyelids exposing them to another day of hunger, impoverishment and lacking.

When your existence helps someone else, in any which way possible, your life could not be more meaningful and your contribution any greater.

Be grateful. Give and ye shall receive.

Harmony in a Relationship

Both positive and negative emotions are like mushrooms, they grow rather rapidly.

The setting was an elementary school. The Maths teacher approached a student famous for his love for mangoes.

He looked at the young child and said, "If I give you an apple, and then another apple, followed by one more, how many apples will you have?"

The child started to count on the tip of his fingers, stared at the empty space for a few seconds, looked up to exchange a glance with the tall teacher and replied thoughtfully, "Four."

The teacher was appalled. It was a simple question. He knew the child was capable of giving the right answer. He meant well.

So he repeated his question. "Listen carefully son, if I give you one apple, and one more after that, and yet another one thereafter, how many apples will you have?"

The young student followed the same process as before, stared at the empty space for a little longer this time and replied with a voice withdrawn, but just as confident, "Sir, four."

The teacher got angry. But soon he remembered the child's love for mangoes. He thought of a method to draw his attention better towards the problem.

He modified his question and said, "Okay, answer this one. If I give you a mango, one more mango and then one more, how many mangoes will you have?"

An innocent smile surfaced on the child's face for he was reminded of mangoes. His little thumb hopped on the tips of his pink fingers as he calculated. Raising his eyes to look at his teacher, he said, "Three."

The teacher was happy. He clearly understood that it was the child's concentration that was causing all the trouble. Now that he had his student's attention, he decided to get the correct answer to the original question.

With much hope he uttered, "Pay close attention now. I want you to give me the right answer. If I give you an apple followed by one more and then another one, how many apples will you have?"

The child imitated his thought process and gestures like before and mumbled, "Four."

The teacher got really angry. He started shouting at the kid, "How can you be so dumb? Why can't you pay attention? I am asking you a simple question. If I am giving you mangoes they are three, but how is it that you keep replying four when it comes to apples?"

The child trembled at the shouting, his face turned red and tears welled up in his eyes. "Tell me! How can apples be four when mangoes are three? Are you trying to fool me?" The teacher yelled.

The child looked down. He had lost the courage to look up or smile. He said softly, "That's because mommy gave me an apple for lunch today. I already have one apple with me."

The teacher promptly realized the gap in understanding, the difference in perspectives. He could have sought the clarification without getting fried. It was, however, all a little too late. The damage to the child's mind was already done.

This little story underscores the basis of all the differences of opinions and arguments. It is not always necessary that there is only one truth. More often than not, there can be multiple truths regarding a situation; all such paths that lead to the same destination.

No matter from which direction you draw a radius, it will always originate from or lead you to the center of the circle.

Rather than believing your viewpoint to be the only right perspective, you may want to spend some time grasping the other's. Understanding is the fundamental ingredient in a harmonious relationship. The damage once done with words or gestures can never be undone. It may heal, but only over a long period of time. I once read somewhere, "Put your mind in gear before you move your mouth."

An opinion is rarely a simple matter. Behind the formation of an opinion, several subtle and prominent forces are in play. One's upbringing, experiences, exposure, circumstances, habits, tendencies, proclivities, environment, and situation contribute towards their forming any opinion. Give other person the freedom to have a right to their opinion while you maintain yours.

A man approached me a few days ago and said that he did not believe in God or even in the concept of God. Should he feel bad? Was there anything wrong with it?

I told him that if his belief made him a stronger, better, happier, kinder, a more compassionate human being, it was a good belief. I made him understand that I would rather have a non-believer with a kind heart than a believer with a cruel one.

Truth has never been an absolute entity and there is a child in everyone.

A Random Act of Kindness

"The question of my bread is a material question, but the question of my neighbor's bread is a spiritual question."

~Nikolai Berdyaev

Nikolai Berdyaev was a Russian thinker and existentialist. His above quote is kindness in a nutshell. Compassion may just be limited to a feeling. It is a form of empathy, a sort of acceptance, but kindness is compassion accompanied with a gesture of giving.

An unexpected gift at an unexpected time given to an unexpected (or even unsuspecting) person with no expectations in return is a random act of kindness – a kind gesture towards someone who is not expecting anything from you. You do it because your heart is open. Our heart has a peculiar property: it can operate in both states – open and closed. An open heart is naturally kind, compassionate, and joyous. A closed heart blocks all positive emotions.

A closed heart does not mean the person is certain to be negative or unsuccessful. On the contrary, a person with a closed heart can be quite headstrong. They may be successful in their careers and positive about their material endeavors, but their heart remains closed towards understanding, appreciating, and expressing love and pain (of others).

Until you can understand the pain of the other person, your heart remains closed for any kindness; it remains blindly focused on your own agenda. The saddest part of a closed heart is that you only realize it was closed when it opens up. Those with a closed heart, unable to perform random or planned acts of kindness, don't even know their heart is closed – just like the frog in the well that doesn't know a sea exists outside. It is when the

door of your heart opens a bit, even a little bit, you experience a whole new world of peace and bliss.

I once read somewhere, "On the gateway of my heart I wrote, 'No thoroughfare.' Love came passing by and said, 'I enter everywhere.'" And when love comes, it never comes alone – it brings a ton of virtues in tow. It is impossible to be kind without being loving; you be one and you become the other automatically.

Once there was a rich man who mocked and scoffed at beggars. Anytime any beggar approached him for alms, he would chastise and cuss them saying they had fit bodies, were young and they ought to work and not beg. This went on for a while until one day God appeared and said, "Listen up, you. If you don't have the heart to give, that's fine, but at least don't condemn what I gave them."

Another way (not the best, but maybe the second best) is to not to be unkind. If you can't or don't want to give for any reason whatsoever, that may just be fine. At least don't stop others or pollute your own mind and speech by being negative about it. A random act of kindness need not always be a material offering. Even a word of encouragement, a compliment, a helping hand could be equally, if not more, profound.

When you regularly do random acts of kindness, one day, something amazing could happen: nature could choose you as the subject for its random act of kindness. Such kind acts are always happening in the universe, at every moment, to millions out there. Even the rains, breeze, snowfall, sunshine, flora and fauna, origination, sustenance – these are cosmic acts of kindness.

A man used to give a beggar \$20 every month. He had been doing it for years. Once he did not pay the beggar and told him that he was sorry because he had to use the money to buy a bouquet for his wife.

"What?" the beggar asked agitatedly, "you spent my money on her?"

Just because we have something doesn't mean it is ours. No one is an owner in our universe; everyone is a medium, a custodian at the most.

Whatever you share, it grows; this is the fundamental law of the universe. When you share rage, anger grows in you; when you share love, love grows in you; when you share contempt, hatred grows in you; when you share knowledge, wisdom grows in you and when you share your time, peace grows in you. When you share what you have, you grow as a person.

Make random acts a regular affair and nature will reciprocate in kind.

The Law of the Land

Lasting attraction is based on truth. If you are a real flower, butterflies will come to you automatically. Truth attracts.

Think about it, almost everyone is working to avoid suffering. People are working towards ever-elusive happiness; they are trying to attract the positives. No one wants negative people around them, adverse circumstances, or calamities. How come they attract negative things then? How come you are attracting what you don't want so easily whereas you often have to work so hard for whatever you want? How unfair! Or is it?

Let me share with you a beautiful story from the *Bhagavat Purana*, a Hindu scripture narrating the glories of lord Krishna and his various incarnations. The story is also found in *Mahabharata*, another Indian epic.

Shishupala was a king who ruled the state of Chedi. He was also a cousin and a formidable foe of Krishna. Krishna had given a word to Shishupala's mother that he would pardon 100 misdeeds of Shishupala, but beyond that he would not be able to forgive him for Shishupala was destined to be slain by Krishna.

Like many other fallen souls of his time, Shishupala hated Krishna. He loathed and detested his cousin and thought about killing him at all times. He desperately wanted Krishna to perish.

Once in a royal *yajna*, sacred fire offerings organized by Yudhisthira, Krishna's cousin and another king, Shishupala and Krishna came face to face. He began swearing at Krishna while the latter kept smiling and warned him to stop if he didn't want to lose his life.

Shishupala paid no heed and continued the slur. As soon as he swore a 100 times, Krishna raised his right hand, pointed up his index finger and the

legendary discus, twirling in full glory – divine and daunting at once – appeared instantly like a bolt of lightning, a clap of thunder. He launched it and before Shishupala could even realize, his head dislodged from his body. Deafening silence and silent dread filled the august assembly.

What followed was most unusual and much to everyone's amazement. All present in the royal court saw Shishupala's soul merge in Krishna, the Supreme Soul. Obviously, they were dumbstruck. How could that be? He did not love Krishna, did not see him as an incarnation of God, to make matters worse, he even despised Krishna.

Yudhisthira, still in a state of shock, asked Narada, the divine wandering scholar, "O sage! Shishupala was jealous of Krishna. He hated him. Then how did his soul merge in Krishna? It is rare even for the yogis who fervently worship Him with extreme reverence, concentration, and devotion. How is Shishupala bestowed with such rare fortune?"

Narada smiled and said, "O noble king! Shishupala merged in Krishna because he meditated on Him every moment of his life. Whether you meditate on something out of hatred or love is beside the point. Your mind does not distinguish between negative and positive, right and wrong. They are two sides of the same coin. It simply manifests whatever you hold onto. His whole consciousness was directed towards Krishna and that is the sole reason why Shishupala merged in Him."

There is your law of attraction! It is the reason why negative people are able to give you enough examples of their fears actually coming true. Law of attraction is why even crooks can be ultra-successful. Nobility of intention is not a concept your mind understands.

It is the concentration that matters. The more concentrated a thought, the stronger it is. From the perspective of manifestation, moral purity is not the most important factor; it is the intensity and persistence of the thought that matters. Whatever you focus on resolutely, without any doubts in your mind, starts to manifest in your life. Of course, your actions aid that manifestation.

You may encounter many doubts while working towards a positive goal whereas negative is always there, present in your subconscious. You are not to be blamed though. It is the result of evolution. Our species has worked hard for its survival. It mostly lived in fear of extinction. The total human population is minuscule compared to animals. So the mind naturally tends to cling to the negative; you feel strongly about negative.

Whether love or hate, they are still emotions. It is when you are indifferent, you do not attract – desirable or otherwise. In a deeply profound and revealing quote by Elie Wiesel, a holocaust survivor and a Nobel Peace Laureate, he states:

"The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference.
The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference.
The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference.

And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference between life and death."

And what is the ingredient to double the strength of a positive thought? Faith. For tripling it? Persistence. How to quadruple it? Purity of the intention.

Whatever you feel strongly about, you will attract. If you hate something strongly, that is all you will get and if you love something strongly, that is all you will notice.

For example, if you hate certain people you do not want in your life, time and again, they are the ones you will encounter at every nook and turn of your life.

You have as much chance of attracting something you hate as things you love. With negativity, fear comes uninvited. The strength of a negative thought is doubled by fear. It is tripled by self-doubt and quadrupled by attachment.

The Most Fundamental Human Desire

Feeling loved is like sitting next to a calm ocean. It is inexplicable. You become an ocean yourself. You feel complete.

What is the most basic human desire? the one that sits at the core of humanism and humanity? the one that can make or break your world? the one emotion that makes all the difference between feeling priceless and worthless?

Based on my own observation and interactions with a large number of people over the years, I have come to understand that underneath all reactions and above all emotions, lies a potent desire, it's elementary, it's causal, it's atomic. You can't break it down any further – it's the desire to feel loved.

The desire to be loved, to be adored, appreciated, recognized, to be accepted by someone, the desire to just belong somewhere, to someone, is one of the strongest desires we experience. People fall out, they grow out, they may even loathe the very people they once loved; it happens especially when they don't feel wanted the same way they did at the beginning. Nothing hurts more than neglect. Neglecting doesn't only mean someone is ignoring you, this is only one form of neglect.

When you are not accepted for who you are, when you are not appreciated for your efforts, when you are not loved for what you are, that is neglect too. And that hurts. Let me share with you a real-life story my lawyer told me 13 years ago.

It happened in 1985. Pavle, a 70-years-old man from Serbia migrated to Australia. His three sons were already living in that country; they had been there for more than a couple of decades. They sponsored their father under the family visa category. Pavle was a widower. Things were not glorious for

him in Serbia. He had lived a hard life, felt lonely and longed to be with his sons. It was a close-knit family and he had waited for over six years to get his permanent residency.

Upon his arrival in Australia, his three sons received him at the airport. Things were well in the beginning, but soon his sons felt they couldn't be bothered with feeding their father or offering him shelter. Pavle only needed a place in a home, in his sons' hearts, and a square meal, but his sons now saw him as a burden. They started neglecting him. Over the next two years, he felt more and more unwanted, rejected, unloved, and even hated by his sons. He didn't speak English, so there was nobody on the streets or in the park he could converse with.

Pavle adopted a rather peculiar behavior; he would stand next to a pedestrian crossing, wait for the traffic to approach and as soon as the cars came near, he would start crossing the road halting the traffic. Ordinarily, any car would have no issues in stopping because it was a pedestrian crossing after all. In this case, however, Pavle was doing it every day, all day. He would get to the other side of the road and then wait for more cars to cross the road again.

It caused great inconvenience. Eventually, the cops issued him a ticket for misconduct and obstruction of traffic. He simply ignored the ticket. Multiple tickets later, he had to appear in the court and face the charges.

"It is an unusual case," the judge observed. "Your medical history shows nothing is wrong with you and yet you repeatedly exhibited mindless and dangerous behavior on the road. You are pleading guilty too. I am at my wit's end. What do you have in defense?" "Human," Pavle responded, "I felt human." "Human? The court has no time for riddles. Be clear." With the help of his son who acted as an interpreter Pavle continued:

"Your Honour, I felt loved. It felt great to see that someone finally saw me as a human being. I felt a strange joy to see someone stop for me. It made me feel that I was not just an obnoxious weed waiting to be pulled out, but was a part of the crop a farmer couldn't wait to harvest. The dignity and respect I felt when cars stopped for me made up for all the loss of respect I experienced my whole life. I felt valued. It was worthwhile. I

recognize that I caused much trouble and I regret it. I promise I won't repeat it."

The judge spoke warmly yet firmly, "Australia is a free nation with utmost respect for every individual on this young soil. You are asked to be mindful of your future actions so others may enjoy the same privilege. My court grants you pardon. The case is dismissed."

Pavle's son broke down in the court listening to his father. They hugged each other in the corridor and cried to their heart's content. Pavle began receiving old age pension soon after he got his Australian citizenship and he remained there till his last breath.

Not all sons realize it though and some do it a little too late. Not all Pavles are redeemed, not all endings are happy. Plus, how does it matter anyway what the ending is like? Who cares whether one is buried or cremated, whether the world remembers or forgets you after you are gone?

It's the journey that's important. For, it's the nature and quality of your journey that has a direct impact on you and those around you. This chapter is not about sons and fathers, it's about being human.

To feel loved is not a privilege but a basic human necessity. It is rudimentary. Unfortunately, today in our world, most are deprived of love. It's often a futile exercise to keep searching for love or to seek it from someone else.

Therefore, if you are not being loved by others, learn to love yourself. It takes a while to get to that state – to be in love with yourself, selflessly.

Until then, give your love to others, to those who need it. And then one day you will find yourself gazing deep into the soothing light of transformation – you will discover yourself in a deep ocean of bliss as your heart overflows with warmth and love washing away all the pain and hurt life has put you through. When you adopt compassion and serve humanity, the providence arranges for exactly what is lacking in your life. Lacking – not as you may define it, but as in what you may need.

Go on, express your love. Make someone feel special. For, you won't understand what it is to be loved unless you love someone.

Sex and Spirituality

Nature survives and thrives on love; sex – in the right spirit – is an extension, a spiritual expression of such love.

I receive a large number of queries from seekers who are unclear about the role of sex in the path of spirituality. They wonder if practicing celibacy is necessary for self-realization; if abstinence is a prerequisite to attain that transcendental state. Interestingly, most religions – all major ones anyway – are bullish, if not downright rigid, about continence. Practitioners, protectors, priests, and preachers of such religions are expected, if not required, to be celibates and they lay great emphasis on seekers to practice it too. Well, that is their opinion and I do not wish to judge them. My focus here is not religion, but spirituality. Religion is one, only just one, of the means to experience spirituality. In order to help you build your own viewpoint, let me offer you four perspectives on sexuality.

The Vedic Perspective

Some vedic texts, notably *Bhagvad Gita*, equate celibacy to practicing austerity. In *Brahmacaryamahinsā ca śārīraṁ tapa uccayatē* (*Bhagvad Gita* 17.14), celibacy is defined as *tapas*, penance of the body. Any penance is done to gain strength, which you may use for the fulfilment of a certain objective. Penance is not the end in its own right. For example, you study hard for 10 hours a day to secure a good rank in some competitive exam. During the preparation, you have a strict routine, you go by the timetable. But once you are through, you no longer keep following the old routine.

Krishna clarifies this in:

Vēdēṣu yajñēṣu tapaḥsu caiva dānēṣu yatpunyaphalaṁ pradiṣṭam

atyēti tatsarvamidam veditvā yōgī param sthānamupaiti cādyam

– *ibid* 8.28

The one who is firmly established in the exalted state, the one who has mounted the vehicle of yoga, rises above all *tapas* and methods. Such yogi has no longer any utility in practicing austerities.

Also, in *āpūryamāṇamacalapratīṣṭham samudrāpaḥ praviśanti yatvata...* (*ibid* 2.70), Krishna states: Just like many rivers merge into the sea, but the ocean remains unmoved, the enlightened one remains still and is not perturbed either at the abandonment or acceptance of any sense of gratification.

An important point to remember is to accept Vedic exposition in its entirety and not distort it as per your convenience. Till one goes through an intense practice, one is not a yogi, no matter how sound his intellectual understanding.

Study of scriptures is designed to give you food for thought and wisdom to perform the right action. They are means to an end. When they are regarded as the end in themselves, it gives birth to rigid secondhand knowledge and fanaticism.

The Yogic Perspective

Patanjali, in his aphorisms lays *yama* (moral restraints) and *niyama* (external observances), as the foundation of his eight-limbed yoga helping the seeker attain meditational equipoise unearthing their super conscious state.

In *ahimsā satyā 'steya brahmacaryā 'parigrahā yamāḥ* (*Yoga Sutras* 2.30), the sage does not put celibacy under *niyama*, but *yama*. According to Patanjali, celibacy is about voluntary moral restraint, predominantly because correct adoption of moral restraints helps one to stabilize one's mind to lead a life of purity. According to yogic texts, celibacy is about

chastity and not necessarily abstinence. It is not an austerity one needs to practice to get somewhere; it is simply a way of life to help the practitioner remove distractions and live a life of balance.

There is nothing unchaste, unnatural or wrong about sharing intimate moments with your partner. This can only help your practice, saving of course certain practices of specific duration that may require otherwise. Only your guru can shed light on such *anuṣṭhāna* or timed undertakings.

Yoga means to join, to become one, to merge individual consciousness in the Supreme Consciousness. All *kriyā* or practices are designed to help you move towards and attain the aforesaid outcome. It is a journey from the outside to the inside. If I may put it, this is applied Veda; practical application of the profound philosophy propounded in Vedic texts.

The Tantric Perspective

Tantra is the rapid path to self-realization. Why is it rapid? Because it challenges everything you have been taught. It is designed to break off your conditioning. Tantra uses seemingly obscure, although meaningful, methods to set you free from the shackles of dualities of good-bad, right-wrong, moral-immoral, hot-cold, light-dark, and so forth.

Kularnava Tantra, *Neel* Tantra, *Sri Vidya* Tantra, *Tara* Tantra, *Kali* Tantra, *Chinnmasta* Tantra and dozens of other tantric texts are replete with practices where exploration of sexuality is a vital aspect of *sādhana* or propitiation, of adoration, of worship. Not all tantric rituals require presence of feminine energy or sexual activity. To tell you the truth, of the five major systems of tantric worship, only two require it absolutely. That too, only under certain circumstances. Practicing rituals with a female consort is not for the uninitiated or for the beginners. It is for the advanced practitioners. It is almost like playing with fire. Unless you know the art, you may end up getting burnt. In this case, compromising your practice and misunderstanding the essence.

Tantric take on sexuality is rather unique. It regards human body as a temple, considers reproductive fluids as sacred offerings, accepts all

elements as divine, and treats everything equally.

Contrary to popular belief, tantra does not encourage reckless sexual acts. It gently allows you to accept sexuality as a part of your manufacture, your original composition. It is only upon acceptance can one understand, absorb, and be comfortable with sexuality. For as long as you are uneasy with any concept, entity or viewpoint, you continue to harbor silent fears and inhibitions and limit yourself from realizing your transcendental state.

Yoga and Vedas are important constituents of any tantric practice. Most tantric rituals utilize yogic practices and Vedic eulogies and mantras. There is nothing called "tantric sex". It is a misnomer; a catchy marketing term used by business minds to profit from the ignorance and fantasies of an average seeker.

My Own Perspective

I have already stated my take on the three perspectives in the respective sections; however, let me offer you my explicit viewpoint on the present topic.

You got your body because your parents engaged in an act of love. You came out of the womb of your mother and were latched to her breasts the moment you were born. Sexuality is the basis of your physical existence; it is a part of your being. It is as sacred as your love for God and as vital as your breath. Some of the greatest yogis, sages, seers were married. They lived in their hermitages, but they had consorts. This is the path recommended by the Vedas; slow and steady, go with nature.

If you gain inner strength, if you become a better, more compassionate, kinder, more loving person by practicing celibacy, you should continue with continence in that case.

However, if you are married and have developed this obscure idea of abstinence being a shorter route to divinity, I am sorry to disappoint you, but this is going to be a futile exercise. It is going to lead you nowhere near God. As part of strengthening your resolve or certain practices that may last

a certain duration, you may practice abstinence, but beyond that, I hope you have a very good reason.

Regardless of whether you are 17 or 70, do not be scared of your sexual thoughts, do not react to such thoughts, do not label them. Thoughts are just thoughts, intrinsically they are devoid of any essence. If, for whatever reason known only to you, you wish to stay away from physical intimacy, all you have to do is not pay attention to your thoughts. They will leave you in no time. Unless you are able to maintain your meditative state at all times, you will have hard time staying them off forever though. Sexuality is innate in every moving creature that breathes.

Some of the world's most successful people – greatest inventors, finest minds, geniuses, poets, peace workers, those who influenced millions of others – were they celibates?

Physical love, whether expressed by a gesture of a simple peck or a passionate kiss, eating together or making love, is an extension, and outward expression, of your inner being, your feelings. It completes any intimate relationship. When channelized, sexuality transforms into love; when untamed, it becomes lust.

Ultimately, it is something you need to reflect upon yourself, arrive at your own conclusion. My write-up is not to be taken as the justification to go rampant and engage in immoral acts. Just stay true to yourself and ask your conscience and you will receive all the answers. Either learn to channelize your sexual energy or expend it wisely. However, if you try to curb it, you will only experience frustration. Harnessing your sexual energy has tremendous benefits and subduing it has enormous downside. So how do we benefit from harnessing sexual energy and how do we go about it? We will discuss it another time.

Whether you wish to be a celibate or prefer to celebrate, be at ease. Do what gives you peace and helps you to help others.

What Do You Really Want?

We are caged by our desires. Why didn't the nightingale see the snare?

Once upon a time, a man owned a beautiful garden full of pretty flowers and fruit trees. Colorful birds tweeted melodiously, bees droned, and butterflies fluttered about in that garden. It was a lively place, like a piece of paradise. It had a small pond too, housing many lotus varieties. The owner cared for his garden more than anything else in the world. He loved a rare flower in particular, a black Himalayan lotus with a heady scent that bloomed through all seasons.

One morning, he was tending to the roses and tulips while a nightingale sang most sweetly. He longed to see the bird from a close distance so went in the direction of the sound. There he saw the young bird pecking at his favourite black lotus. Its petals had come off and the lotus was mostly destroyed. The man was furious and hurled a rock at the bird, but the nightingale took a swift flight and escaped unscathed.

Grieved and angered, he vowed to catch and kill the bird. Scattering some barley, sesame seeds and jaggery near the pond, the man spread a net and waited patiently. As expected, a little while later, the nightingale came flying again. Noticing the food, she landed on the mesh and ate to her heart's content. But when it was time to take off, she realized her mistake; she was stuck. The man got hold of the bird and clutched it tightly by the neck. "I'll kill you," he said.

"Kill me? But why? The food was lying on the ground. I didn't steal from your granary."

"No, not for these grains, but you destroyed my black lotus."

"I'm sorry," the nightingale pleaded. "I was only following my food chain. Have mercy on me. I always thought that the owner of this beautiful garden must be a tender, caring and a loving person. Little did I know..." the bird broke-off.

The man thought about it and a sense of compassion enveloped him.

"Okay, I'll let you go," he said loosening his grip. "I want to tell you a secret, my friend," a grateful nightingale said. "I have a penetrating vision. There is a pot full of gold, buried at the roots of the old *peepul* tree in your garden. It's yours now."

The man dug up the pot filled with gold coins and was ecstatic beyond bear.

"I'm curious," he said to the nightingale perched on the bough. "How come you could see the treasure hidden underground, but couldn't see the wide net clearly spread on the floor?"

"I had no use or craving for gold, but I longed to eat the sesame seeds and jaggery. While flying towards them, all I could see was food. My desire had made me blind," said the bird.

A mad pursuit of endless desires makes one oblivious to what is already there to be enjoyed. That is why Buddha called it the root of all sufferings and Krishna preached detachment from the outcome of desires. Desires keep you busy; they keep you on your toes. Above all, they make everything you already have appear small and lacking.

For example, you own a house, but the desire to have a bigger house will repeatedly make you feel what you have is not enough. Your partner loves you, but the desire to be loved more by him will make you feel incomplete in the present.

The desire to earn more, to have more, to be more, to gain more, etc. become great barriers to enjoying the present.

I am not suggesting that you can't have desires. Sometimes, the pursuit of your desire can be an exhilarating one too. Until you reach the exalted state, it's perfectly fine to have your desires and to pursue them, it's okay to feel elated upon their fulfilment or feel low when they are not met. It's human, it's natural. Having said that, it certainly helps to be conscious of what you are pursuing in life.

It can be a life-changing exercise, to sit down in peace and question the desires you have because once you become aware of your pursuits, you start to see things in a new light. It is so because chasing your desires with awareness does not make you blind; because mindfulness does not allow you to lose sight of what you already have. This awareness keeps you positive, it keeps you happy. It allows you to see both the net on the ground and the pot hidden under the soil.

So do you want what you really want?

Secret to Happiness

Making someone happy is like lighting a candle. You don't lose anything, but the light spreads anyway.

When we make someone happy, the same part in our brain is activated when we do something for our own happiness. This is not philosophy, but neuroscience. I am not surprised though; the joy of giving far exceeds any other I have ever known. They say charity begins at home. A happy environment at home is comparable to heaven on earth.

In my occupation, I get to meet many people from all walks of life.

Often though, I have observed a rather strange behavior among many couples. They rejoice in the company of people outside the four walls, but feel irritated with the ones at home. I have noticed a tenuous frown appear on their faces even at the mention of their partners. They tell me they are tired of trying to please the other person and they couldn't be bothered anymore. This feeling of "I couldn't be bothered" is a definitive sign of downfall in most relationships. Earlier, if they had made any attempt to bring joy to the other person, now they have thrown the baby out with the bathwater (after drinking most of it).

I admit it can be quite difficult to make certain people happy. There too, I have an observation: when you just can't make the other person happy no matter what you do or how hard you try, chances are you are no longer on their playfield. Mentally, they may have given you the red card. They have decided not to source their happiness from you. If you speak to them asking what do they really expect from you and they are not being reasonable, you will never be able to make them happy, not for long anyway. In that case, if you have a choice, move on. And if you don't have a choice, seek a peaceful refuge within.

A man got married to the woman of his dreams. He was head over heels for her and couldn't believe his luck when she agreed to marry him. After their engagement and before the actual wedding, every night he thought about her. He had no doubts that theirs was going to be the most loving, functional, and finest married life ever known to mankind. His fiancée had a high opinion of herself. (When you believe you are better or superior than your partner, you can forget about a happy marriage.) They got married with great fanfare. His wife loved eggs for breakfast, so when they were away on their honeymoon, the husband made poached eggs for her in the morning.

"These aren't done right," she commented scornfully.

The man felt bad that he couldn't please his wife and made even greater effort the following day

"Oh, I can't eat poached eggs every day, you know." She refused to eat them.

He made scrambled eggs the next morning.

"It's okay, but too fatty. Just boiled eggs with salt and pepper would have been better."

The following day, to give her a choice, he brought out two dishes: a plate of scrambled eggs and two boiled eggs. He was certain that she would be happy today.

"What's this? You boiled the wrong egg!" she screamed.

You know where this marriage is headed, right? Should I tell you the easiest way to make the other person happy? No, it is not flowers, things, or gifts; they play a part, but there is something even more important. Appreciate them. When you make the other person feel that you appreciate what they are doing for you and for the relationship, it boosts their self-esteem and morale right away. When you make an effort to appreciate, you directly gain from it as well. How? You actually start to see their efforts.

Let us face it, it is not an easy world out there. When you thank your partner for everything they are doing it brings you closer; it strengthens the relationship; it fosters love and understanding.

Once a woman, a master chef, was asked what did her husband usually say when he savored the delicacies she cooked on a daily basis?

"He only speaks about food when something is amiss or if he doesn't like it," she said. "So when he is quiet, I know he is enjoying it."

"Initially, I would ask him if he liked my cooking, but it irked him so I stopped asking," she added.

Sadly, this is not a joke, but a real incident. To the waiter we don't know, we say smilingly how delicious the food is, we tip, we appreciate, but to the one who is closer to you, every courtesy is withdrawn. You see the disparity?

When you make it a point to appreciate, the newness never fades and when something remains new, you never get bored of it. When you don't get bored of something, you never take it for granted. When you don't take the other person for granted, your relationship can never wither away. Yes, never. It will continue to blossom and spread fragrance.

Appreciation is gratitude in action.

What Is Beautiful?

Beneath beauty lies a sense of connection. Whatever you can connect with, you will find beautiful.

What is beauty? Something that is attractive, pleasing to look at? Or is there more to it? When it comes to the first impression, no doubt, external appearance can make an immediate mark. If you look at a pretty woman or a handsome man, it is only natural to find them appealing. Regardless of your marital, social, or religious status, you cannot artificially deny their external beauty. Pretty pathetic should you do that, if you ask me.

That said, if external beauty was all that irresistible, why would there be any breakups among the stars, luminaries, and the well-endowed? Allow me to help you reflect on the notion, definition, and concept of beauty. I read a story once. I am quoting it verbatim below.

An elderly woman and her little grandson, whose face was sprinkled with bright freckles, spent the day at the zoo. Many children were waiting in line to get their cheeks painted by a local artist who was decorating them with tiger paws.

"You have so many freckles, there is no place to paint!" a girl in the line said to the little fella.

Embarrassed and perhaps hurt, the little boy dropped his head.

His grandmother knelt down next to him. "I love your freckles. When I was a little girl, I always wanted freckles," she said while tracing her finger across the child's cheek. "Freckles are beautiful."

The boy looked up. "Really?"

"Of course," said the grandmother. "Why, just name me one thing that is prettier than freckles."

The young kid thought for a moment, peered intensely into his grandma's face and whispered: "Wrinkles."

That is so sweet, right? That said, will you marry or even look after the grandmother for her wrinkles? Probably not. Will you see the same beauty in her wrinkles like the little boy did? Only if you are that boy. Beauty cannot be chained by a string of words or some definition because what is beautiful is never about them, it is about you. Beauty is not absolute, it is relative – relative to your state of mind, to your own perception.

Whatever you connect with, you will find it beautiful. With whoever you feel secure and complete, you will find that person beautiful. That is why the wrinkles may truly be the most beautiful thing for the little boy because he shares a bond with his grandmother.

The youthful Mulla Nasruddin was determined to marry a beautiful young girl from a poor family. His father wanted him to marry someone rich. "What is wrong with you?" he said, "the beauty that has blinded you is only skin-deep."

"That's deep enough for me," Mulla replied. "I'm not a cannibal."

I find this joke amusing, but it also makes a persuasive point: beauty is what matters to you. It is your own reflection. As you progress in life, intellectually and emotionally, your priorities change. What you find pretty at 15, you may not find it half as beautiful when you are 30.

As you grow to understand yourself better, the importance of mere external beauty declines in your eyes.

It does not mean the visual appeal of something or someone beautiful diminishes in your eyes, it just means you place greater value on other traits. In the words of Khalil Gibran: "Beauty is eternity gazing at itself in a mirror."

In 1893, Swami Vivekananda, the awe-inspiring and brilliant monk clad in saffron robe, was taking a stroll in Chicago. The outfit seemed unusual for the surroundings. A couple, dressed in formals, were ranging the same sidewalk as him and the woman said to her companion: "I don't think he is a gentleman."

Her statement reached Vivekananda's ears. He went up to the couple and said, "Excuse me for I overheard your remark. In your country, the tailor makes a man a gentleman, but in my country, it is his character that makes him one." I don't know what happened afterwards and it is immaterial in the current context. Be as it may, was the woman right in her thinking? Was Vivekananda right in his response? Actually, it does not matter. The woman expressed what she felt and she did so not directly to Vivekananda but to her partner.

If you retain the right to carry yourself however you like, let others have the freedom to form their opinions. Media, society, advertising, religion – they all bombard you with stereotypes, sometimes subtly and many a time explicitly. The more you let others' opinions matter to you, the more you move away from your internal source of happiness.

"Why do you want a divorce?" the judge asked the young man seeking divorce.

"Your Honor," he said, "I can't stand her when I'm sober and she can't stand me when I'm drunk."

When someone doesn't find you beautiful, please know that it is mostly about them. (Hope you don't interpret this as the moral of the joke.) While you may change a little to work a common ground to see what the other person likes, beyond that there is not much you can do. If you want to win approvals of others, if that is what moves you, well then, you better dress, behave and be the way they want.

If you vainly want to keep the world happy, you have to play a puppet in its inept and clumsy hands. You pay for the dress, but the strings come attached at no charge.

If for a moment though, you remove external affirmations from the equation, if you eliminate their acceptance from your perception about you, how will you behave? What will you do? In my opinion, that is how you ought to look at yourself. It is infinitely more important to find yourself beautiful when you look in the mirror than for others to find you pretty when they look at your picture.

No one is looking at you with naked eyes. Who you really are and what they see is out of sync. Their sight is filtered by their lenses of beliefs, perceptions and desires. They see what they want to see; this is where beauty loses its independence. Learn not to be bothered. It's worth the effort. As long as you are honest with yourself and you are doing your best, you are just fine.

If you can complement yourself, you can complete yourself. When you feel complete, when your cup fills up, everything looks beautiful. Beauty is what you connect with, what matters to you. You are beautiful.

Tell someone how spectacular they are and how they have made your life beautiful. Once done, repeat it in the mirror. Don't tell me you haven't yet fallen in love with yourself.

Speaking the Language of Love

*Nobody is strong enough to resist the language of love.
It pierces the heart and goes straight to the soul.*

Interestingly, the harmony in most human relationships, certainly the social and personal ones, depends on one simple element. It is not about material gifts or even fulfilling needs. With this element, you can wreck someone's world or bring the best out of that person; you can motivate them or entirely kill their self-esteem with this. How you are perceived largely depends on it and it is not about how you look or what all you own. From the greatest to the simplest are often tied to it. Can you guess? I am talking about your speech. The words you pick and the style you choose to deliver them can make all the difference. They determine whether you are loved or hated, accepted or rejected, cared or closeted, shared or shunned.

Your speech can trigger profound emotions not just in humans, but in any living creature. The only difference is that you may occasionally deceive humans with your false speech, speaking words you never meant, but animals sense your sincerity. When you speak sincere words, kindly and sweetly, the inner you starts to glow; you experience peace. Your relationships automatically improve and you increasingly find yourself surrounded by those who care about you, primarily because your speech and words can make them feel good, make them feel important, make them feel human, even divine.

Vedic texts categorize all emotions fundamentally into two types: positive and negative. When you trigger a positive emotion in someone, you get a favorable response. Such responses strengthen both you and them, it builds your bond. As a result, love grows naturally.

The other day, a man in his 50s visited me from a far off place. It took him three days to reach the ashram. A simple villager from a distant state,

he heard from someone about the place and said he could not resist the temptation to come and see me. I met him and he was elated and tears of joy rolled down his cheeks. This was our first meeting. He narrated a story to me.

About 30 years ago, a renowned Baba, saint, was visiting a nearby village for a week. Devotees were expected to visit in large numbers so a stage with tents was setup. Community fire offerings to the deities and sermons were scheduled. So this person and his friend got on their tractor to visit the saint. Both were farmers and this was the only vehicle they had besides their bicycles.

The place was a little too far for paddling so they chose the tractor instead. It was a very hot day, as if the sun had descended on earth. After navigating through the traffic, driving on paved and unpaved roads, a tiring 90 minutes and several kilometers later, they reached their destination.

It was already midday. Their lips were parched and their bodies singed from excessive heat. They longed for water. In their hearts, however, they were happy that soon they would be seeing the saint. They went to the meeting room, where a young monk, perhaps a disciple of the godman, was present. He seemed to have no connection with anything divine; nothing about him gave the impression that he had anything to do with self-realization or God. Nevertheless, he was robed in saffron, so the farmers showed due respect and asked him if they could meet the saint.

"Wait here and I will go and inform Baba," he replied in a cold and indifferent tone.

"Where can we have some water?" the man asked hoping to be pointed to a nearby water source.

"Water? It is on the other side of the ground. But what if Baba comes now and you are not here? Have it later after his *darshan*," he rebuked, completely ignoring their sweaty faces and dehydrated looks.

The farmers sat down and waited. They kept licking their lips, but there was no more saliva forming in their mouths. They really needed water, but

they were here to quench their inner thirst, they reflected. After half-an-hour Baba appeared. They prostrated before him and sought his blessings. The saint asked them all sorts of questions about their domicile, demographics, land ownership, which tractor they drove, and the rest of it.

"Baba, how come there is no one here? It is supposed to be such a big event," the man uttered out of complete innocence.

"You think everyone is as stupid and dumb as you are to travel in this heat? Are they all idle and redundant like you to come in the middle of the day?" Baba replied in a frustrated and angry tone.

Pin drop silence ensued. All questions about God, all spiritual desires, all madness about self-realization fled their very beings. They looked at each other, bowed before the holy man and left promptly.

They got on their tractor, did not bother to drink water and left that place as quickly as they could. On their way, the duo didn't even talk among themselves. They felt hurt and ridiculed. They stopped their tractor at a lemonade stall, under a tree and got down.

It was 30 years ago and living was not so cruelly expensive. They gulped down three glasses each of tasty lemonade and rested under the shade for half-an-hour and had another glass each. They paid their dues and the vendor smiled. Everyone felt complete. The vendor even helped them to restart their tractor which had to be done manually by pulling a cable in one swift, jerky movement, like the old-style lawn mowers.

They did not visit another "saint" for many years after that. Verbal offerings of Baba killed their spiritual curiosity.

I chuckled while hearing his story. More at his simplicity and the manner in which the farmer narrated the whole thing; it was situational.

He said, "Only if that Baba had uttered some words of love or care, we would have pledged our lives to him."

He stayed in the ashram for a few days and left peacefully.

His story highlights something profound: before all knowledge, possessions, labels, and attainments comes the emotion of love. There are only two ways to express love: with words, and gestures. Generalization aside, everyone is tied to the language. You use words and gestures of love with them and they become yours.

Buddhist texts further expand positive and negative emotions into eight types, four in each category. And four out of those eight depend solely on your speech, articulation, and choice of words. If you can speak softly, without raising your volume, you can settle even the most violent disagreements; you can get your point across in practically no time.

Regardless of how serious, important, grave or complicated the matter, all that is required to speak kindly is mindfulness, a gentle reminder to yourself about how you want to behave. If you decide to practice restraint and kindness in speech, you will experience and spread bliss. You may have nothing material to offer, you surely have words to choose from though. Pick them carefully.

Life's greatest pleasures are in the smallest things, in priceless simple gestures, in sincere words. Express yourself in the kindest possible manner.

Tell someone today how important they are to you.

Love or Attachment?

On the tree of life are the cages of desires holding captive the birds of attachments. Love roams freely.

"What is unconditional love?" someone asked me the other day. "How do I love someone unconditionally?" "What does it even mean when we say I love you?" I asked a group of people. "It means we have feelings for the other person," one answered. But what does having feelings mean? Before I write about unconditional love or even just love, it would help to distinguish between love and attachment. Here is a little story:

A man, the quiet type, was sitting with his friends in a local inn. After he had a couple of drinks, he opened up a bit and asked his friends, "Do you love me?"

"Of course, we do," said his friends, "that's why we are here together."

"So do you know what I need?"

No one answered.

"If you don't know what I need then how can you say you love me?"

This says it all. Love is about understanding what the other person needs and not what you think they should need. This is the key difference between love and attachment.

The former is about finding yourself in the happiness of the other person, whereas the latter is about feeling happy to have the other person your way.

We can't say we love someone unless we find out what do they actually need and make an attempt to give them that. Attachment is like buying a golden cage for the bird you love, feeding it the finest food and wanting to

keep that bird within your sight. Love is opening the cage and setting the bird free. Granted, there is a problem when the bird says, "I want to eat your food and I want to rest in your cage, but I want to fly free at my leisure and will." Well, welcome to the world of relationships. It's strange, but real.

Attachment says you are mine and love says I am yours. Love is not worried about exclusivity; it is about peace and happiness whereas attachment is just another term for possessiveness, and not just possessiveness but exclusive possessiveness at that. Attachment says what I have from you, no one else should have it. I am not labelling it as right or wrong, nor am I suggesting that a relationship, notably marriage, cannot have a mutual framework. In fact, it must. I am simply stating that attachment is about instructions and rules whereas love is about inspiration and care.

Of course, I've given you the ideal definition, but this is not an ideal world. So in our world, love is generally no more than a claim and mostly it has attachment, possessiveness, and desire, all rolled into one. Love says I don't want to hurt you whereas attachment says I don't want to lose you. See the difference?

"I hate pasta. I don't want to see pasta ever again," a husband said to his wife.

"How can I ever understand what you want?" screamed his missus.

"On Monday you liked pasta, on Tuesday you loved it, on Wednesday you ate it, on Thursday you liked it, on Friday you had it and suddenly on Saturday, you tell me you hate pasta. You're unbelievable!"

If you want your love to bloom, keep the freshness alive. Freedom fuels freshness. Love is about understanding and attachment is about enforcing. One is about setting free and the other is about holding on.

Falling in love may be an instant act, but seeing it through is a slow, steady, careful, and a delicate process. Falling in love is the easy bit; wanting someone more than anything else in the world is not something out of the ordinary either.

After all, you want them because "you" like them, and therefore, you want to have them. So you try hard to make yourself wanted by the other person. When that doesn't happen, you try to hold on to the other person hoping one day they may start wanting you as intensely as you desire them. This is attachment. Sad though it may sound, but if they don't want you now, they wouldn't want you later either.

You want to be loved by someone else because you haven't yet learned to love yourself; you haven't yet ignited the fire in you; you have tried offering yourself to many in the past, but it hasn't worked. It hasn't worked because you are not offering yourself to you; you are not living your own life; you are not focusing on you. Instead, you are living to be a part of someone else's life, to be the focus of the other person. You deserve better.

Why is it so hard to love without attachment? It is so because you are trying to look at love as an independent emotion. The truth is, love is anything but independent.

What Is Love?

The light of love is dependent on four conditions. Fail one condition and it flickers; fail two, it goes away.

What is love? Just having feelings for the other person or wanting someone real bad is not always love; it may be, but generally it isn't. Think of love as an object for a moment, an entity that is made up of four elements. You bring these four together and love appears miraculously. In the absence of the primary constituents, what you experience may be strong attraction or it may be a crush, infatuation, something... anything but love. Let me make my point with an anecdote:

A man comes home in the evening to see his children, still in school uniform, playing barefoot in the street. He enters his home and finds that their school bags, their socks and shoes are lying in the living room. Further he sees the dining table littered with open bottles of peanut butter and jam, dirty plates, and bread crumbs. On his right side is the sink with a stack of dirty dishes. The dinner is not ready and the whole kitchen is one big mess. Shocked and intrigued, he goes into his bedroom to find the bed undone, his wet towel from that morning still lying there, and his wife, still in her night suit, reading a book.

"What happened?" he asked perplexed, "the house looks as if a ghost did the rounds today."

"Oh, that," she said casually. "You know how you always say what do I do sitting at home all day? Well, whatever it is that I do, I didn't do it today."

In our sense of self-importance, it is easy to underestimate, even overlook, the contribution of the other person.

Your work may be different, it may even be harder, but it doesn't mean it is more important. Love is about seeing the world through the eyes of the other person. This leads me to spell out the four factors of love.

Respect

When two people live together, there are going to be trying times, difference of opinions, disagreements, etc. Nonetheless, if you choose to be respectful to the other person and not be sarcastic or contemptuous, your relationship will remain intact. Even if you don't agree, be respectful. It's worth it.

Each time you shoot words of anger, every time you belittle the other person or their contribution, when you mock them, a great blow is delivered to the delicate flower of love. It's okay to disagree, it's even okay to have arguments sometimes, but it's not okay to shout or to talk down. For your own good, respect each other.

When someone's self-esteem is attacked, they will quickly, even if temporarily, forget what all good you have done for them. It is because self-esteem, self-respect, or even ego, is linked to the most innate, fundamental human aspect of self-preservation. Respect is not limited to just respecting the other person, but their values too. They may have different beliefs than yours, a different way of thinking, of operating. You don't necessarily have to agree, but if you wish to retain love, you have to, at the least, respect it.

Care

The second piece in the love puzzle is care. It is love in action. You may tell someone twice-a-day that you love them, but the moment they need you and you are not there for them, what good is your love?

When he is sick and you don't give him medication, when he is scared or nervous and you make no attempt to soothe him, when you can't make him feel good about himself, when you can't comfort or brace the other person,

what good is that love? Care in actions is far more important than care in words.

Love doesn't just stop at paying the bills; it is about repaying the other person. Every word, every gesture of care fosters love. What do you do with the things you love, be it your cars, gadgets, or accessories? You take care, right? Therefore, what would you do if you really loved someone? You do the math.

Compassion

I once read, "Nobody is perfect. And I'm Nobody!" This is how many people live. They know they are not perfect, but they believe and behave as if their word is the gospel. Compassion is about being kind towards the other person and their mistakes and not holding them hostage to your own self-perceived sense of superiority or perfection. When you don't agree with them, or when you can't understand their perspective, can you at least adopt a compassionate view and let it go? We are often compassionate towards our own mistakes, forever justifying our thoughts, actions, and emotions. However, it is having compassion for the other person that heals love. "I am hurt but I will let it go," says forgiveness. "I am sorry you had to do this," says compassion. Forgiveness sympathizes and compassion empathizes. And love? Love synthesizes the two.

Appreciation

The fourth and the final ingredient of love is appreciation. From a five-years-old to a 95-years-old, appreciation makes the other person feel valued, it makes them feel loved, feel important.

No one wants to be unhappy. Whenever you see good in the other person, express it, appreciate it and they would automatically want to do more good. You don't have to do it artificially; you just have to look at their positive side. Everyone could do with a bit of appreciation. In a relationship, two people day-in-day-out do numerous things that could be

appreciated, but the lack of the first three elements make them oblivious to the good the other person is doing.

Here is a story: After being married for 14 years, a man applied for divorce.

"On what grounds do you seek divorce?" questioned the magistrate.

"Your Honor, my wife has absolutely no table manners. She is a disgrace at social dinners."

"You have been together for 14 years, and now suddenly her table manners are an issue?"

"Yes, Your Honor, because it is only last month I read a book on manners and etiquettes. After finishing the book, I observed that she has none of them."

As we grow and gain new perspectives, as our priorities change, we often want the other person to change as well. The other person, however, is going through his own set of lessons. Just because now you know more or know different, doesn't make the other person unworthy or unfit for your love.

Mostly when people ask, "Do you love me?" what they are really asking is: "Do you want me, like *really* want me, more than anything or anyone else in the world?"

It is then followed by an assumption: "So if you want me, I am sure you will do everything possible to keep me happy, to take care of me, forever."

Often, love is confused for an emotion; for madly wanting someone or being wanted badly by the other person. It may be a form of love, but it is often not sustainable. The truth is, in real life, this type of love only happens for a short time and then people enter into a relationship. Once living, loving, and seeing each other becomes a part of the routine, they start to ignore one or all of the four elements discussed above and love withers away before long.

Lasting love is always mutual. You can't love someone out of pity or obligation; it won't last. In the initial stages, love is a strong feeling and then a strong desire. Thereafter, it is an act; not the act of making love, but the act of loving. It requires some effort from both sides.

Next time you tell someone you love them, ask yourself whether you respect them, care about them, whether you are compassionate and appreciative towards them. If the answer is yes, ask yourself whether your actions show it. If the answer is positive, then it is love. And do you want them too? A big bonus point there. Companionship, joy, togetherness, a sense of peace and security automatically find place in a loving environment. Love adds up.

The Value of Love

No one offered Love any place on their boats, except one. Who?

What is more important? To value what you have or to value what you do not have? Think about it for a moment. Gratitude is valuing what you have and ambition is valuing what you may or may not have in the future. If you drown the voice of gratitude in the roars of your ambitions, all you will be left with is a great deal of noise and no music.

You ask why? Because often our ambitions are endless, they are not cohesive whereas gratitude is the collective response to everything life has given you; everything you already have.

Long, long ago on an island lived a group of emotions: both positive and negative. Their names were Pleasure, Sorrow, Grief, Insecurity, Anger, Fear, Compassion, Humility and Gratitude. That was not all though. The island was inhabited by other entities that governed a higher place in the society. They were Ego, Wealth and Time. Love was a resident too, but it mostly lived with the others. Love never held onto anything; it owned nothing and it was mellow, kind, and soft. All of the above emotions were tenants at the houses of the humans on that island.

With glaciers melting and the sea level rising, the island was gradually sinking. It was clear that it would disappear before long. The residents called an urgent meeting and concluded it was time to leave the island. They decided that everyone was responsible for making their own arrangements and they got down to the task.

Love thought differently though. It did not want to abandon an island that sheltered it for so long. It wanted to wait till the last moment; it was hopeful some might stay back.

For Love, it was not a matter of trade or give-and-take; it was more a question of integrity and promise. The island was fast losing its dry ground to the obdurate ocean.

The humans were the first to leave the island. Some of the negative emotions like Sorrow, Grief and Insecurity left with them. Love had no boat of its own. It looked expectantly at the other emotions on the boat and pleaded, "Please, can I board your boat?" The humans did not even respond. They were too busy fighting among themselves.

"We've latched onto the humans ourselves," the emotions spoke in unison, "we've no place for you here."

Just then, Love saw Ego sailing on his boat made of steel. It looked rather strong; heavy but sturdy.

"Can I join you?" Love asked. "I take very little space."

"No!" Ego yelled, "Anger and Fear have taken the other two places I've on my boat. Besides, I have only met you occasionally whereas they are my bosom friends. I can't let them go."

Water was rising fast and at a short distance Love saw a magnificent yacht. It was owned by Wealth.

"Can you please let me on board?" said Love.

"I am sorry, but I already have Pleasure," Wealth responded, "I can't part with him."

Love looked at the dismal state around. Just then a voice called out, "Come, Love, come. Hop in."

As soon as Love got on the boat, it saw Compassion, Humility and Gratitude exuding brilliant radiance. They were on board already. Love thanked them.

"Oh, it is not our boat," Gratitude said, "you need not thank us."

"Whose boat is it then?" Love was surprised. "Who saved me?"

"It belongs to Time," Compassion answered.

"But, I was worthless in everyone else's eyes. Why has Time saved my life?"

"You see, Love," spoke Humility, "Time alone knows your real value."

If you re-read and reflect on it, this anecdote contains the wisdom of life. In our fast-paced world, you can be so focused on getting to the destination, in crossing the finish line, that priceless things appear worthless. The worth of anything is not determined from its price, but value. Imagine you sacrificed your health and family to make \$10 million faster than anybody you know. The price of that sacrifice maybe \$10 million, but what about the value of that money? Is it worth the price, the sacrifice?

When gratitude fuels your ambition, it becomes an effortless journey, but when ambition drives gratitude, a sense of lacking never really leaves you. When you have compassion, gratitude and humility, what you have is love indeed. These three are the primary constituents of love. Every other variant may just be an attachment or an obsession.

It is when we lose what we have, when time separates us from what we take for granted, do we really understand the value of what we had.

The Secret to Healthy Relationships

Loving and living are not synonyms. Loving may be an emotional matter, but living together is mostly about practicality.

The most common complaints I hear are "I don't feel the same way," or "He's not the same person anymore," or "She doesn't respect my family," or "He no longer understands me," and so forth. I am not surprised because there is a common misconception that when two people are in love, it will be enough to keep them going. The truth is love alone is rarely enough because just wanting the other person is not love.

Loving someone and living with that person are two totally different things. Just being able to love is not enough for harmonious co-existence. Successful relationships are not built on some Utopian definition of love, but on simple, practical aspects of living. Often when things turn sour, we compare our relationship with the ideal definition we once held.

This view makes us feel that nothing good ever existed in our relationship, that the whole thing was a mistake from the start. Hold your horses. It is your mind playing tricks. Your emotional state has taken over the reality. Allow me to share a beautiful story here I had read once.

Two people were deeply in love with each other. They believed they were soul mates. After a courtship of four years, they decided to get married.

On their wedding day, the bride's mother gave her a bank passbook and said, "Think of this as your marriage account. Every time something good happens in your life, deposit a small amount and make a note of it in the passbook. Try to put in a greater sum if the event is significant. Today is your wedding and I have deposited \$500 in it."

The couple had a great start to their married life. As years rolled by, they went through their share of ups and downs, of agreements and arguments, of feeling good and bad. In due course, they had two children, bought a home, built savings and so on. As they got increasingly busy with work and other responsibilities, they spent less and less time with each other. The bond began to weaken and eventually the sense of belonging disappeared. So much so, they started to feel like two strangers living under the same roof.

Indifference turned into dislike and most of their conversations into arguments. Finally they decided to throw in the towel. They had tried hard to make their marriage work, but in vain. All they could recall were moments of stress and grief. The wife spoke to her mother and said she had made a blunder by marrying her husband and that they had decided to divorce.

"Sure," the mother said. "It's your life. If you can't live together, you can't. But make sure you go to the bank and close the marriage account before you sign the divorce papers. Don't leave behind a record of such a poor marriage."

A few days later the wife was at the bank, standing in line, waiting for her turn. Fidgety and impromptu, she opened the passbook. She glanced through it in disbelief at the number of deposits they had made. There were quite a few. There were deposits for her first pregnancy, their first home, first car, promotion at work, her second pregnancy, their anniversaries, birthdays, family vacations, festivals, celebrations, and so on.

She went back home without closing the account and handed the passbook to her husband. "I couldn't muster the courage to close this account. Could you do it instead, please?"

The husband took the passbook and, much like her, opened it to see the balance and saw all the entries they had made over the years. It hadn't been that bad a run, he thought. They realized that their marriage wasn't just about quarrels and arguments. There were plenty of good moments too.

Life is no fairy tale, but it's not a horror story either. It's neither a comedy nor a tragedy, it's just life. When life goes jelly, we often only look at the negatives, the depressing times, the trying times of the past. Our mind loses its ability to see the complete picture, to remember the beautiful moments.

When you lose a tooth, for instance, for days thereafter the tongue keeps going to the empty space. It is not interested in the other 31 teeth still intact. Instead, it keeps rolling on the cavity of the lost tooth. Similarly, mind is attracted to what we are missing, and in doing so, it overlooks, even rejects, what we already have.

A newlywed couple asked their master, "What shall we do to make our love last?" "Love the other things together," he responded.

This is the secret of successful relationships: love other things together and don't lose sight of the good things you have. When you are able to love not just the person you love, but what they love, your relationship reaches a whole new level. If what matters to them starts to mean something to you, living together becomes a great deal easier.

Loving and living together at the same time is only possible when two people care about what the other person loves.

Living with Love

Love is innate in everyone. It is the cause of your existence and the basis of your being. You become what you love.

If I were to pick the most important word from the dictionary, without a moment's hesitation, I would pick 'Love.' The greatest and most sublime of all emotions is love. Its profundity renders it unjust for love to be merely classified as an emotion, it is a state of being, a transcendental state at that.

The more firmly you are placed in love, the greater the bliss; such bliss is imminent in you that it will start emanating from you. If it were to come down to just one difference between being divine and being human, it would be the former's ability to always only give out love compared to the latter who, sometimes, falters.

This genuine word most pure, in this artificial world mostly impure, however, has been overused and abused so often that it has become a blanket term for many things it is not. A lot of people love someone, some philosophy, a cult, a sect, or their possessions and devote their entire life saving for and protecting them. People also refer to growing in and out of love and consequently, relationships.

Some pledge their life and love to each other only to separate later on. There are many who find their love fade away with time like the most glittering colors do under the sun. But if it was true love, how could it fizzle away?

Truth, while it may be not be absolute, is not dependent. Similarly, true love is not conditional; for what is based on certain criteria is more an agreement.

A few are able to love God truly. He does not talk to them or answer their questions directly. He does not partake of their offerings nor does he ever show His form to them. They still continue to love God and cry for His help.

If they are not doing such worship out of any fear or with a view to attain some objective, they are close to showing true love. Whether they are completely established in love can only be ascertained when they hold a communion with God in a human being. If they are still able to love everyone with the same emotion, they have become an embodiment of love.

When the only emotion people reciprocate with is love, they are no less than love incarnate. Know that in the presence of such a person, your own being undergoes a silent transformation.

Loving God is easy for He neither criticizes nor complements; He does not hug you nor stave you off. You have accepted Him the way He is. He is a product of your belief; unfortunately often not your own belief but the one passed onto you. Loving God is still a divine act for a human being; loving all is a godly act of a divine being.

If you do not have any realization of your own and you do not have any knowledge about anything, but if you choose to return all emotions with love alone, people will offer you the highest place on the altar of their hearts. When stroked by trouble you will be in their thoughts before God and when struck by joy they will attempt to contact you before visiting the shrine.

So how can you ascend to the level of a divine being? Actually it is easier than you think. The practice may be harder than mere comprehension of the underlying philosophy. You must be comfortable with yourself and be contented with what you have in order to cultivate the emotion of love. You must also learn to stay inwards so you may not only maintain your blissful state but be unperturbed by the emotional, intellectual, and material offerings of the world. This will allow you to always only give out love: pure, unalloyed, and pristine.

Love is innate in everyone. It is the cause of your existence and the basis of your being. It is often misplaced at the same time in most people. Love when misdirected takes the form of an attachment and when poorly placed, it promptly becomes an obsession.

Till such time that you turn inward completely, you can make an effort to discover your present state of love. The following section will help you do that. Once done, you can repair it if damaged, rejuvenate it if worn out, renew it if expired, and strengthen it if weak. It is going to take some work, but the rewards are infinitely priceless. Regarding the present placement of love in you, reflect on the following:

People love different things and they do so differently. Often attachment, infatuation, attraction or certain desires ranging from lust to liking, from pity to passion are mistaken for love. Love may well be the basis of such emotions as well as the trigger, but it is when love is polluted and no longer pristine, it permanently assumes one of the aforesaid forms. Love is very fluid and an apt shape-shifter.

Of those who love, their love is generally divided among the following three in no fixed ratio; sometimes they only love one of the three, other times only two. Your goal is to channelize all your love from other categories into the single most important one. Onto the categories:

Those who love things

There is no dearth of people who fall in this category. They love things and they are head over heels with their possessions. Personally, I am always amused when people are in love with non-living things. Such people are deeply attached to their cars, gadgets, accessories, and so forth. Basically, they are in love with everything they own and have a price in the market.

If such a person's wife is in a car accident, he is more worried about the car and the insurance than his own wife. He may cleverly hide his emotions and customarily enquire about wife's well-being immediately followed by a series of questions regarding the car, damages, and the like. A significant

portion of their time is spent caring for their soulless possessions; the rest on talking about them and any remaining, worrying about them.

Love is a peculiar emotion. It transforms you into the one you offer it to. If you start loving a criminal, you will find yourself accepting his immoral ways and becoming one yourself with your acceptance. If you love a saint, you will turn into one too.

Similarly, when you start to love things, you become a lifeless thing yourself. The only difference—you have consciousness and the things you love don't. When you are in love with non-living things, you will not be able to love people; certainly not so freely or expressively. I hope you do know that your car, house or those golf clubs don't love you at all.

They are just as ready and able in anyone else's hands as in yours. If you continue to be a thing by loving non-living things, you will soon be a forgotten thing as well. Because when you are a thing, you will either be outdated, obsolete or old-fashioned one day in the future, for that is the fate of all "things" eventually.

If, sadly enough, you are one of those people, you need to do some serious thinking. Let go off your attachment with objects. Direct all your love to the other category. Love only grows when distributed among living beings, for it is only in another living being that it lives, otherwise it perishes.

Loving things will drain you out of love leaving you hanging high and dry; too high for anyone to hear you and too dry to retain any fragrance or taste. If you don't start loving people more than you love your possessions, you will waste your beautiful life on lifeless things before the life in you flees leaving all your possessions behind for others to use and abuse at their will and leisure.

Your dead photo, hung incongruously, in a manner no less unceremonious, on a listless wall will be the only reminder that you ever existed.

Those who love philosophy

Some people fall in love with a philosophy, religion, cult, sect, cause, or a certain belief system. Of the above, a cause if dedicated to the welfare of others may be worth loving, the rest deserves your attention, opinion, or even sympathy, but not love. Always remember, you are what you think but you become what you love.

These people, the ones who love not things, but a certain intellectual proposition, are still better than the first ones. At least, they develop their intellect or live their life in accordance with the religion or cult. All religions, I believe, have something wonderful to offer. There is a caveat though. An ongoing affair with a philosophy can turn one into a fanatic and sometimes, an extremist. Once down that route, it is very hard to change. Since you adopted a doctrine not based on your own discovery, either at the whim of your mind or a superficial intellectual grasp, giving it your love will turn you into a superficial and dry person.

Love perishes in dryness

Those who are in love with a philosophy or have bought into someone else's opinion; consequently, their love, its concept, and its expression reduce to an artificially manufactured and opinionated theory. Most religious professions, paid or voluntary, social or commercial, fall under this category. Such practitioners consider the cause or doctrine they believe in above other human beings. Some will even give or take life for such a cause.

If, by any remote chance, you happen to be in this category which you may be justifying by branding your obsession as your passion, please, I implore you, take a good look and try to see trees from the woods. If you must dedicate your life to a philosophy or a set of dogmas, at least, create your own.

A borrowed one will only fetter you, robbing you of your freedom. The ultimate attainment is to shift your focus of love from this one to the next category.

Those who love other living beings

You are the one who has learnt that fellow human beings regardless of the virtual differences of race, creed, pigmentation are just about as human as you and as divine as the One you worship. I thank you for gracing the planet earth. You make this world a beautiful place. You may practice whatever religion; you have discovered and understood the essence of spirituality.

When you treat everyone like you treat yourself and see everyone as you see your God and when everyone receive only love from you, you are a sage.

True love is unconditional.

It is not governed by the action-reaction laws of motion just as it is not a theory of physics.

When you throw a stone or a flower in a lake, the lake accepts both with equal indifference. The stone drowns immediately; the lake accepts it and does not complain. But the lake thanks you by keeping the flower afloat. When you either expect or want anything in return for your "love", be sure what you have is not love.

When your love is based on conditions of having some-thing in return – be it mannerisms, love, respect, anything at all – it is not love in its truest sense, but when the only thing you have to offer is love, it is undoubtedly pure.

Whenever you buy anything from the market, you always pay with money. Money is the only thing you offer to buy the intended item. The more you have, the more you can buy. Similarly, love is just about the only currency for all that is priceless. The more you have it, the greater your choice. The more you can give, the more you can buy.

It is like having a million dollars. If you are not prepared to part with a dime, you cannot buy anything. You may be a great saint or a heinous sinner, but if you are not willing to give love you cannot have any in return. When you give out every ounce of love you have in you, you will be rewarded with an infinite supply of bliss and love in return.

Love is part of your very existence. If you want to experience bliss without treading an arduous path of tedious practices, just start giving out love. For every emotion you are offered, return it with love; for each gesture you are shown, gesticulate back with love; for every word uttered to you, respond with love. Try this unfailingly for a few months and see the difference for yourself.

Give your love to people and other living beings, before you offer it to a religion or a thing. And things remain just that - lifeless, soulless things. Try telling your car that you are very sad today and see if it responds with the care you always showered on it.

Talk to your God, your religion, telling them you are feeling low and see if He comes out of the holy book, picture or idol. Try the same with a human being; you will at least get a response.

Before you go tell another person about your woes, listen to someone else who is struggling with his issues and help him feel better. When done to a few people a few times, you will always have a listener, someone who cares, someone who wants you to be happy. I hope you know that your love is worth a lot more than wasting on things.

Go on, learn to love so you can learn to live. Express your love. Make someone feel special. Make them feel human. Make everyone a recipient of your love. Make each one yours. If you are tired of being human, become God instead.

Be divine.

All of the above is only possible when you can live a life free of expectations. And that, in turn, is possible only after you have turned inward. Turning inward will open the flood gates of love and bliss.

It is only natural then you will give out what you have in you. Imagine being infinitely loving and blissful and eternally so at that.

Why Do People Cheat?

The wild one hunts because: 1. It can 2. It is hungry and 3. It is innate in him.

Why do people cheat in a relationship? Cheating is an abuse of trust; it means you have been taken for granted, taken for a ride. Like many other artefacts of one's personality, cheating is a habit too. It is a conscious act. People cheat when they lack inner fulfillment. Although that is no justification, it remains the primary cause; they are seeking pleasure outside of what is reasonable. One's sense of fulfillment is rarely dependent on external factors; such factors may influence but inner peace remains a personal matter.

You can be the best partner in the world; you may be the most caring, giving, loving and faithful person, that still does not guarantee any loyalty from the other side. If your partner is the restless type like the monkey that hops from one tree to another, he is more prone to engage in extracurricular activities, predominantly because it is a part of his fabric. There is never a reason for cheating, only an excuse. So here are the top three:

Opportunity overrides obligation

This is the foremost cause. They cheat because they can. Given time and opportunity, some can bend the truth and stoop down to alarmingly low levels. Getting into a relationship, specifically marriage, comes with certain mutual and individual obligations. When opportunity is allowed to overtake obligation, the result is an act of cheating. It is not always about infidelity; it may well be about non-fulfillment of one's social, moral, emotional, and financial obligations. In fact, often a lack of understanding and commitment on these fronts causes a relationship to go stale. If your partner escapes the opportunity of fulfilling an obligation or uses the opportunity to escape an

obligation, it is an indication of non-seriousness and deceit, of insincerity and non-commitment. Marriage and commitment are synonymous.

Lust defeats love

This remains one of the most common causes. Love is like a movie, it is ongoing and spreads over a period of time whereas lust is like a snapshot. Lust is innate. Just before lust turns into an act, there is the thought of it. It takes a great deal of effort to drop the thought; the easier route for majority is to slake their lust, to temporarily get rid of the thought by fulfilling it.

However, since thoughts are ceaseless, before long, they experience an arousal of lust again. It is a vicious cycle. Anything that ties you down – be it any habit, belief, religion, anything that narrows your viewpoint – limits you as a person; all acts that give you a sense of guilt, will weaken you.

And when you are weak, your mind will easily override your conscience. When one engages in immorality, driven by lust, it means he is weak. If anything, your love should propel lust and not the other way around.

Habits die hard

They cheat because it is their habit. Only a certain degree of self-discipline and self-reflection can help one to discard their undesirable habits. The old saying of birds of the same feather flock together applies to habits too. If you observe carefully, you will notice that a noble person can have many good habits and a cruel one, many bad habits. The one who can lie comfortably, can cheat easily too. You can never change anyone's habits except your own. It is only when your partner decides to change and act towards it, will he change. Change may be triggered by external factors; it is always an inner calling though. It is for this reason that meditation and other similar activities can give one the strength to change. Primarily because meditation is an act of turning inward; that invariably brings strength. Habits are habits, they move in groups.

Definition of cheating can vary a great deal from culture to culture. There are certain sects, nations, cultures, even religions, that allow a man to have more than one relationship, simultaneously. Morality is not always an absolute concept. What may be moral for you, may be immoral for them and vice-versa. So how do you know whether your act is moral or immoral, whether you are cheating or if you have simply made a one-off mistake? The answer is quite simple in fact.

First and foremost, your conscience always guides you onto the path of light and truth. If you can follow your conscience, you will know right from wrong.

Secondly, all else being equal, if you truly believe you did not do anything wrong or that it was an innocent mistake, you should be able to go up to your partner and confess.

Just like following exercise, diet, and a healthy lifestyle to reduce the probability of diseases; practicing harmony, understanding, and transparency in a relationship greatly diminish the chances of adultery. Give each other some personal space so there is room to discover, sustain, and nurture a sense of individuality. Stronger individuality leads to better dependability. Furthermore, fulfillment in any marriage comes from how dependable it is for you – emotionally, physically, intellectually, and financially.

No one wants to be the bad guy or be unhappy; people do not aim for disharmony. Tied by desires, they cannot let go and driven by their habits, they engage in acts they may repent later on.

I may reflect more on the present topic going forward, especially when it may be prudent to call it quits in a relationship.

Till then, make each other feel important, fill each other's cup up, be each other's strength. Complete each other. The strength of a relationship is directly dependent on how important you make the other person feel.

The DNA of Desires

One desire leads to another. Like the human DNA, desires have their own genetic code. Awareness is the key to tame them.

Long ago, a guru and his disciple – an ordained monk – lived blissfully on the outskirts of a village. Once the guru imparted his knowledge, he decided to go away and do *tapas*, penance, in solitude for a few years. He spoke to his disciple and informed him about his decision. The guru further instructed his disciple regarding the code of conduct reminding him of his vows of *sannyasa*, renunciation, and asked him to stay firm in *nitya karma* – his spiritual discipline.

The guru bade goodbye and the disciple started leading a life of righteous conduct keeping only minimal possessions – a couple of cooking pots, his begging bowl, two sets of ochre robes and loincloths. One day, he was surprised to find his loincloth tattered by mice. When he went out seeking alms that day, he asked some villager for a piece of cloth as a replacement. The donor obliged. The following day, however, the same thing happened again – mice shred the new loincloth into pieces.

The disciple felt uncomfortable begging for a new loincloth yet again. Nevertheless, he asked for another one. Needs easily overpower self-esteem just like lustful desires over morality and intelligence. This time, the donor advised him to keep a cat to eliminate the rat menace. *What a plausible idea!* The same day he arranged for a cat and as expected, rats disappeared; so like most material attainments.

A few happy days went by before the disciple faced another challenge. Truly, such is the nature of the material world, so temporary and unstable. He now had to feed the cat. And in order to do that, he had to beg for more food. Somebody suggested that the disciple should keep a cow, so that the milk could be used to feed the cat as well as supplement the monk's meal. A

noble villager promptly donated a cow. The disciple experienced a rush of ecstasy thinking of all the dairy products he would have free access to now on.

The disciple now owned a cottage, a cat, a cow, and a cow-shed. Of course, his loincloths remained intact now. Feeding, cleaning, and milking the cow took up most of his day. He found himself gasping for time to perform his spiritual practices. After all, if not for the life of an ordained monk, he would not even need to be in a loincloth in the first place. He took his predicament to a wise householder in the village who happened to have a daughter of marriageable age. Impressed by the simple nature and virtuous qualities of the monk, the old man offered his daughter's hand to him. The monk saw little harm and lot more benefit in the arrangement, so he agreed. For, in desperation one's thinking is clouded and all means appear just and right.

The wife turned out to be a noble woman. They started to lead a happy life. Everything became easy for the disciple, his daily needs met by the loyal and clever wife. She encouraged him to procure more land around his cottage and more animals so they could sell milk and make more money. They, naturally, added a couple of kids to the family equation along the way. The monk compromised his spiritual practices since he found making money and a gaudy life it entailed more attractive. Occasionally, he spared a thought for his guru and a sense of guilt washed over him for relinquishing his vows in pursuit of a material lifestyle. Be that it may, when in youth and rolling in money, the material world seems a place worth living in and living for.

One day, the guru, after his penance of 12 years returned to meet the disciple. He looked askance at the property. The place, adorned with tens of cows and servants, looked 20 times bigger than what he had left behind. The guru thought some crook encroached upon the land evicting the simpleton disciple. He decided to go inside to hex the culprit with the power of his long penance. His brows twitched in fury before he was greeted with a *dandvata pranama* – obeisance offered in the most respectful manner. The guru couldn't believe his eyes: his disciple in a householder avatar. Before he could gulp his emotions, the disciple signaled his three

children to bow down at the feet of his guru. Shocked, shaken and shattered, the guru somehow managed to stay calm. He pinched himself to confirm that it was not a dream.

With great dismay and dire inquisitiveness, he took his disciple aside to understand the situation. "How on earth could you get entangled in all this?" asked the guru shaking his head in disgust. The disciple lowered his head a little, further lowering his eyes, shyly uttered in a voice barely audible, "I had to do all this to save my loincloth!"

The Desire Tree

Desires prompt us to act, but it helps to know their source because they determine what we become.

Just like moisture is inseparable from water and heat from light, desires are inseparable from our mind. Desires are but thoughts not yet abandoned by you. Thoughts are not good or bad, neither sublime nor ridiculous, right or wrong. All such labels are mere designations you give them based on your conditioning. Intrinsically, reflections are all the same – identical. It is what you do with your introspections that matters than the actual thought itself. Upon emergence of a thought, its pursuit will either take the form of a desire or an emotion, positive or negative.

All karma originates from your mind. A lingering thought destabilizes your mind, disturbing your state of tranquility like the ripple in a still pond. A quiet mind with purified self remains unaffected by the fulfillment or abandonment of desires; both outcomes are perceived by the mind anyway. So, whether you want sense gratification, gratifying recognition, satisfying love or a simple *laddoo*, there is no difference.

While the law of karma cannot be discounted, you are doubtlessly a product of your own desires. Your desires prompt you to take action or tread a certain path. Before you can know the nature of your desires, you ought to understand the nature of your mind.

When a desire is fulfilled, it gives you temporary joy and pleasure. The outcome is as ethereal and elusive as the desire itself. If desires could be satisfied forever, it would not be fallacious to seek fulfillment. However, when fulfilled, countless more spring up. Once you understand the nature of desires, they stop bothering you.

Since you now have a firm grip on the tranquil state of your mind, your thoughts will disappear immediately upon emergence. While desires cannot really be classified, to aid ease and understanding, I am categorizing them for you. Here:

Physical desires

All forms of sense gratification are pure physical desires. You envisage a pleasant outcome from the fulfillment of these ones. Such anticipated pleasure prompts you to hold onto the thought of satisfying your desire. As a result, your actions, emotions and intelligence work together to attain that fulfillment. These desires can be insatiably active or eternally latent in you; or sometimes be present together. Whatever you enjoy through the body is basically sense gratification. Most people spend their whole life satisfying these ones. Such people experience everything through the body; live for the body and die for it. They remain faithful, obedient and unquestioning servants of the body. Their life revolves around their body's need for food, clothing, copulation, comfort, care, and so forth. Fulfillment of physical desires is fundamentally linked to the body's well-being. Human body, however, continues to deteriorate and many work incessantly hard to maintain it – a vain exercise.

Emotional desires

The need for love, reciprocation, recognition, sharing, etc. fall under this category. These are the result of an ignorant mind and have emerged from the conditioning of your mind based on your present life and possibly a karmic residue from the previous ones. These desires impel you to look outside of your self for fulfillment; you need "somebody" for companionship, sharing, etc. Since you are now searching outside for fulfillment, you have set out on a quest comparable to ranging the universe from one end to the other – there is no end.

Till your last breath, you continue to play a puppet to these ones. Physical desires may subside when the body grows weak and old, but

emotional desires remain alive and kicking. These desires arise when you forget your true nature and when you are dependent.

The term "emotional need" is a misnomer. Emotions are a product of a conditioned mind and as such mind has no needs.

The sight of a slaughter house may trigger a negative emotion in you whereas it may be positive for the business owner and neutral for the machine operator. It all depends on how you are conditioned. Upon discovery of your true nature and in maintaining that state, emotional desires will simply disappear.

Intellectual desires

A conditioned mind, that is outwardly focused, gives birth to intellectual desires when temporarily satisfied from the fulfillment of physical and emotional ones. These prompt the individual to create something new or engage in seemingly selfless social causes. Fulfillment from these desires lasts longer than the first two ones.

When all else is going well, and when you feel that sense gratification and emotional fulfillment are not enough, intellectual desires take birth. By their very nature, a certain degree of insight is gained. However, an egotist, unsettled and ignorant mind will continue to bind you. You may devote considerable time and energy on these ones; the first two will still not leave you.

Predominantly because you have simply engaged your mind elsewhere rather than settling it. Often, the pursuit of these desires creates something valuable for the society. Creating a charitable organization, working towards a material or spiritual discovery, devoting to a social or a religious cause are examples of intellectual desires. Better than the first two, these help you turn inward. The greatest thinkers, inventors, and scientists were the product of intellectual desires.

Transcendental desire

Unlike the other three, this one is always in the singular. When the only thing remaining is the burning desire to discover your true nature, half the work is done. Chances are you have transcendental desire because you have realized the futility of gratifying infinitely insatiable desires of the first three types.

Fulfillment of the transcendental desire will free you from the fetters of ignorance, removing all shackles of conditioning. The desire of this nature is the ultimate quest of discovering your own truth. Without saying much, you could be Krishna, Christ, Buddha, Mahavir or any of the greatest preachers, prophets or thinkers the world has ever seen.

Your false ego holds the fort of physical desires and in turn is boosted by the fulfillment of such desires. Your emotional desires fuel your ego and intellectual ones satisfy it. Your false ego is merely an accumulation of your karmic imprints due to experiencing the world, since eons, as an external and real phenomena. If you peel off the layers of an onion, you are left with nothing in the end. Similarly, when you purify yourself, no trace of ego will remain in you for it is the impurity and ignorance that make up this intangible yet concrete element: ego.

Non-fulfillment of physical, emotional, and intellectual desires shatters, hurts, and alters your ego respectively. Paradoxically, non-fulfillment of transcendental desire will arouse dispassion in you impelling you to work harder towards discovering your true nature. And upon that discovery, your ego will dissolve completely. The first two types of desires make you seek the joy outside; that permanent bliss is never to be found outside. So despite your sincere and strenuous attempt to continuously experience joy from them, you continue, albeit unknowingly, to feed such desires all the while creating more.

When the raiment of your peace and calm is woven from the fabric of intellectualized truth and conceptualized knowledge, it will unwind itself in a jiffy, without notice, any time your latent desires erupt or when in crisis. You can only tame the beast once you understand its nature. Desires are first to be understood, then tamed, followed by their mastery and later conquest before they are eliminated.

Concentrative meditation will still your mind, and, therefore, desires. Contemplative meditation or pure bhakti will decimate them completely. Eventually, you will need to learn to take your mind off each time a desire arises. With practice, you will actually start to see your desires as mere thoughts with no intrinsic value. To detect the emergence of thoughts requires an ever-present and alert mind, quite like the security system at the airport that beeps even if you walk through it with a penny in your pocket.

Riddance from physical desires requires contemplation and relinquishment. Elimination of emotional desires requires reflection and dispassion. To rid of intellectual ones, intelligence and an inward dawning of wisdom is required. Fulfillment of the transcendental desire requires a firm adoption of all aforesaid methods as well as complete surrender if you are a bhakta or an unflinching practice of meditation if you are a yogi.

One need not be alarmed when desires come knocking, it is only natural. The key is to win the battle without fighting, to reach at a compromise without making one. When you discover your true nature, you will no longer have any illusions about your needs or desires.

Desires are attractive fruits on the mind tree. How many can you clip or pluck after all; you need to get to the root. And the root of the desire tree is aptly called the mind. Expectations are the illegitimate children, with desires as their step-siblings, of an ignorant mind and conditioned self. Once married to a desire, be ready to pay child support for a very long time to come. With many on-going affairs with other desires and de-facto "expectations" at that, you do the math. As the wise say, it pays to be loyal.

When They Don't Love You Back

What can you do when an apple falls off the tree? Matter of the heart is similar – love is something like that.

There is little you can do if you love someone, but they don't have the same feelings for you. The other person may change, they may even come around, but he or she will not love you the way you love them. I have met hundreds of couples and have responded to thousands of emails (literally) and I'm yet to see even one such case. Yes, it's possible that two people continue to live together amicably out of commitment or care, in fact, it's a common scenario, but those warm feelings they once had for each other rarely return.

There was a girl who was deeply in love with a man. He was an angry person, but he assured her that he would change after their wedding. She believed him because she loved him. They got married and the husband became increasingly abusive soon after. In the first year, she was still in a state of disbelief and shock for he was doing everything opposite to what he had promised. The second year, she thought the situation would improve. The third year, she tried to change herself thinking this might make them both happy and he might alter his ways too. In the fourth year, she realized it wasn't working and a year later, they divorced.

Battered and hurt, she decided she would never marry again. Nonetheless, a few years later, she was married to another person. This time, the guy was too sweet and unusually so. He was the other extreme compared to the first one. Citing some obscure spiritual reasons, he avoided sleeping with her. They were introduced by members of a religious organization, so she believed him. Thinking at least he was providing for her and not being abusive, she accepted their marriage sans physical intimacy. Twenty years later, one day he broke down and said, "I am sorry,

but soon after I was betrothed to you, I got into an affair and it went on forever." She was numb. Her whole world was wiped out.

"How long did you see her?"

"Seventeen years."

"Why are you telling me now?" she questioned.

"I couldn't keep it in me anymore."

"So what do you want?"

"I don't want a divorce," he said.

"This is ridiculous! You cheated on me for 17 years," she said. "Why did you leave her?"

"We broke up because she wanted me to leave you and I couldn't. So, she married someone else."

"But we had nothing to share in the last 20 years."

"Yes, but I cared about you," he reasoned.

"This is crazy. Is that why you never touched me because you loved her? Tell me the truth."

He was quiet.

"I wish you hadn't done that," she said. "You wrecked my life. All those years, I thought I wasn't good enough for you. I didn't know you loved someone else. I'll never forgive you for this."

They separated soon after and eventually divorced. This was a real life story I shared without distortion or exaggeration. An episode like this is not common but I've cited it to tell you that when the other person is not invested in you, there is practically nothing you can do to make them love you. It doesn't mean harmony can't be revived in relationships, but, when

the damage is too great or if the other person is not willing to work on it, there's little hope. What can you do if an apple falls off the tree? You can't really re-attach it to the branch.

When you've tried everything you can think of, when you've given it your best shot, and you are still not loved in return, you are left with three choices:

Change yourself

If you have no choice, if you must stay on with the person who doesn't love you due to financial, familial, or other reasons, stop expecting love so you may live in peace. If you can't move out, for your own sanity, move on. This is not necessarily the easiest, but it is the most practical and feasible choice.

Change the other person

In reality, this is not even a choice because you can't change the other person unless they are willing to change. I have listed it here for a reason though. To quote Brené Brown, "You cannot shame or belittle people into changing their behaviors." If you want any change in the other person, you can't expect it by demeaning them. When they don't give you what you expect from the relationship, you can't have it by continuously whining about it.

Change the person

Often, a lot of people go in for this option only to enter into another unfulfilling relationship.

When you decide the current person is no good and that you must have someone else, be very sure you've actually and honestly done whatever you could to save your relationship. That said, if you are in an abusive

relationship, please don't blame yourself. There is no justification for abuse in a relationship. In that case, protect yourself and move out.

"I don't know the solution," a man said to his friend while complaining about his wife. "I don't know what to do with her."

"Why, what's wrong?"

"She has the worst memory in the world."

"So she forgets everything?"

"I wish," the man sighed. "She remembers everything man!"

Sometimes, it is just about your willingness to forget, your willingness to overlook; sometimes that's all it takes. Leo Tolstoy wrote in *Anna Karenina*: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."

Life is mostly about relationships: professional, personal, and interpersonal. The first relationship you have is with yourself. Respect and value it. Don't torture yourself. People with high self-esteem possess one common trait: they value themselves, they value what they have to offer and they consider themselves worthy of love. They believe it. Compassion and care are part of their natural makeup. No doubt there are others too who have no empathy or compassion, but claim they are worthy of love. The difference is they do it out of their ego and not self-esteem.

Do something worthwhile with your thoughts, with your time, with your life. Peace of mind is not a blessing but a commitment, a choice. Choose carefully. If you are committed to being happy, no one can stop you.

Why Do People Love or Hate You

*People don't love or hate you but what you have to offer.
If you have what they want, it is love, or else it is hate.*

Once upon a time, soaring high in the blue sky, gliding on its wide wings, hundreds of feet above a pristine lake, a young eagle was scanning for food. He spotted a fish swimming in the crystal clear water below. Without a moment's delay, he dived and grabbed the fish with its sharp claws. He thought of flying to a high ground so he could sit and dine in peace.

Barely after the take-off, a group of eagles – a whole convocation – started chasing him. They were bigger in size and more experienced in hunting. The young one tried hard to hold onto the fish; haplessly flapping his wings to fly far away. But the other eagles continued their brutal attack. Driven by their own hunger, they were willing to kill the young eagle. The young eagle was wounded, some of its feathers dislodged and he was bleeding at many places. In between this snatch-snatch, tired of fighting against other birds, he lost hold of his game.

With great speed, the fish fell off. All the other birds left the young one alone and went straight for the fish instead. To his surprise, no one was after his life anymore; they were not hurting him any longer. He flew to a nearby tree. While sitting on a branch, examining the wounds, the realization dawned:

"I thought they hated me and that is why they were attacking me. I really believed they hurt me because they didn't like me. The truth is they had nothing to do with me. It was not about me. It was simply about the fish. It was all about what I had and not what I am."

People do not love you or hate you. It is not actually about you. It is not "who" they love, it is "what" they love; it is not "who" they want, it is

"what" they want. They are not after you, they are after what you have.

When you are no longer able to offer what they want or when they no more want what you have, their love starts to fade. This is why people grow out of relationships. So many times people have written to me that their partner is good, they want to stay in the relationship, but they are just not motivated. Well, it means their priorities have changed. Sad but true.

Nature has evolved based on needs. Sustenance of relationships is often dependent on what people have for each other. Species have survived because they took care of themselves. It is ingrained. Believe it or not, if you want someone to love you constantly, you have to keep offering what they want. You have to keep modifying according to their needs. I am not just talking about care, kinship, and bond; I am talking about love. Especially, if their love is dependent on the fulfillment of their own desires or needs, they will continue to love you as long as you have the capacity to fulfill them.

When you offer them what they do not want, they become disinterested in you. Imagine sitting on a pile of gold and offering it to a monkey, or offering bundles of grass to lions. They won't be interested in your offerings. When people become indifferent to what you have, they grow out, they move on. Their interests vary based on their priorities. Imagine offering food to someone who just had a full meal; thanks, but not interested. Does selfless love exist? Yes. It is a rarity though. Selfless care is more common.

When you want someone to love you the way you love them, you are asking for a little too much. Because, for them to love you back the same way, they would have to be exactly like you; they would need to want what you want, they would need to lose their own identity.

The young and rich widow asked Mulla Nasruddin, "Will you always love me this much?"

"The sun may rise from the west," he said, "but my love for you can't go down even by an ounce."

"Well, my in-laws have filed a suit against me and I am likely to lose all my wealth."

"That doesn't bother me," Mulla said confidently, "I may never see you again, but I will never stop loving you."

Words are easy. The fact is most worldly relationships are held together by a degree of self-interest. Such self-interest is not always material, it may be in the form of intangible things like emotional and moral support, etc. I am simply stating a fact without tagging it good or bad, right or wrong.

When someone hates you, just know that they only hate what they do not understand about you. Be it another person, religion, philosophy, ideology; you can only ever hate what you do not understand. As soon as you understand something, you develop either love or compassion towards it. Why does a child hate green vegetables? The same child when grown up, happily drinks wheatgrass juice and willingly munches on distasteful raw greens. Why? Is it interest, need, or understanding? Need I say more?

So you have two choices: either be yourself, doing the right karma, be happy with varying degree of love you get; or keep adapting, adopting and asking for more. The first one is synonymous to turning inward and the second one is insatiable: a bottomless pit, an endless pursuit.

Four Pillars of an Everlasting Relationship

A solid relationship stands on a strong foundation. It gives you room to play and be together.

Most people enter into a relationship with the intention of making it work, with the hope of deriving joy together, with the goal of being together. Their intentions are as noble as the partners themselves. However, why do relationships that once looked as solid and iconic as the Taj Mahal come crumbling down like a sandcastle?

My core philosophy that can help you understand relationships better and live the life of your dreams: A good relationship has four pillars, columns of strength and togetherness. The building of any close relationship stands on these four pillars. Spacious and cozy rooms of faith, love, respect, intimacy and understanding are built on these pillars. If the foundation is strong, you can withstand with remarkable ease, storms of mutual and personal crisis, floods of turmoil, tides of emotions and a whole heap of other unprecedented circumstances and adversities.

The four pillars of a relationship are the four types of securities. Think of a relationship as an individual entity, a building if you will. Your job is to ensure the strength of these four pillars. Each pillar is equally important.

The pillar of financial security

One of the most important factors in the survival of any relationship is financial security. It is your financial well being alone that will ensure a roof over your head among the fulfillment of other basic requirements. Loving is tough on empty stomach, and living, next to impossible.

If you are not financially secure or you cannot provide financial security to your partner, your relationship can fall apart any day. In a marriage, if you cannot run the house on one salary, the chances are, your borrowing or spending is outside the bounds of affordability or your finances are poorly managed.

If both partners are earning and one were to lose their job, would you be able to provide security to your partner? In other words, does your partner feel safe that you can provide an umbrella during the rainy days? If yes, give yourself a pat on the back and put a tick mark against it. And, if you also have a savings plan you follow, bonus points to you. Twenty five percent of your relationship is taken care of; one fourth of harmony is resting on solid foundation.

The pillar of physical security

Are you there for each other physically? Physical security is not just about protecting your partner, it is not about being macho or a superhero; that might help though. By physical security, I mean much more than that; I am referring to an act of intimacy, of being physically together. Interestingly, people enter into a marital or a similar relationship driven by their physical and emotional needs and as time goes by, many either downplay such needs or start seeking gratification from other sources. Vedic scriptures permit union of a man and a woman only for the purposes of procreation.

The upside of this was, a novelty remained in the relationship and the downside was either starvation or too many offsprings. If your partner can depend on you for physical protection in the hour of need as well as look up to you for the fulfillment of his physical needs, your relationship can weather great crisis.

The need for sense gratification goes on the back-burner over a period of time; it continues to simmer and seethe there, I may add. The need for intimacy never goes away completely. Therefore, physical security, both in terms of protection and fulfillment is paramount.

The pillar of emotional security

Financial crisis can be managed with talent and common sense, physical urges may subside over time, but emotional needs remain just as strong. In fact, even a slight vulnerability in any one of the pillars put the pressure on the other three to make it up. Imagine a dog hurting one of his legs. The pressure of moving, running, and jumping is on the other three legs now. Love, gratitude, tolerance, compassion, forgiveness are all emotions that are highly contagious. If you practice them, nurture such virtues, imbibe those emotions, you will contribute significantly to the health of your relationship.

Repairing any damage to the pillar of financial or physical security is relatively easier, but this one is a pillar of gold. Any grief you cause your partner on this front with your gestures or words will injure their heart, mar their love, cause a deep wound. If you are emotionally there for each other, you can be assured of a fulfilling relationship.

This is majorly because it is during their weak moments that people lose sight of their human side; losing it is generally enough to trigger a whole heap of monstrous emotions and regrettable actions.

The pillar of moral security

This pillar is made of crystal – exquisite, but fragile. Can your partner trust you morally? Any damage to this pillar is irreparable.

Wounds from moral damages never heal. If you have compromised on morality, your partner will never be able to forget it; even if they want to. They may forgive out of compassion or compulsion, but the relationship will stand on a shaky foundation from thereon. The foundation of a fine and fulfilling relationship is sound morality. Where do you draw the line between the moral and the immoral? We need not even go as far as infidelity. For example, is lying always immoral? What if you help someone against your partner's consent? Well, there may be no set-in-stone rules for all situations, there are only guiding principles.

There is someone you can consult in these difficult situations, who will never misguide you – your conscience. When in doubt, ask your conscience. It is easy to drown the voice of conscience in the loud rumbles of desires or justifications. However, you do so at your own peril, at the cost of your own peace and bliss. It may even cost you the relationship. If you are not the type who can provide moral security, you should seriously consider not entering into a long-term relationship.

That is all there is to a relationship: the four securities. A relationship is all about giving, sharing, and togetherness. If both the partners can act like grown-ups, half the problems will disappear, and, if they can be there for each other, the other half will never appear. If you decide to be happy, no one can stop you.

Marriage, with all its price, continues to be a sacred institution like no other. It is like a gym membership. If you really want, you can go to the gym and work out, make friends and stay fit.

However, if you are lazy or cannot find the time, member-ship alone is not going to bestow good health. Similarly, if you want bliss, joy, togetherness, and dependability from your relationship, you have to work for it.

"Do you know mum," the new bride told her mother, "he gives me everything I ask for."

"That merely shows," replied her mother, "you are not asking for enough."

It is easy to ask, to want, to have, to expect. Be sure you are at ease to give and share as well. Nature will reciprocate. It always does. Take care of yourself and your partner.

Four Truths of Marriage

Marriage can be like the MW Radio band, a little disturbance can cause great noise. Everything else sounds gibberish thereafter.

Living in this world, relationships are inevitable, be it at work, in the society, at home, in the family, everywhere. Generally, the more intimate a relationship, greater and deeper rooted the expectations. The focus of this chapter is personal relationships, the type where both physical and emotional intimacy form an integral part. Society may label such relationships as husband-wife, girlfriend-boyfriend, lovers, and so forth.

No matter how independent or peaceful your nature, irrespective of your faith, beliefs or religion, fulfillment in any relationship is directly dependent on the quality of commitment from both the partners. If there is a mismatch but both acknowledge it and are willing to work towards fixing it, the issue can be fixed. However, if one of the partners does not feel or acknowledge any issues, much less understand them, you can work till the cows come home, the relationship will continue to be an unfulfilling and incomplete experience.

Forming bonds or breaking them is rarely a black-and-white matter. It is not always easy to just call off or put up with a relationship. Your state of mind is greatly, if not constantly, affected by your ties. The primary source of your memories are your relationships, they are the seat of your emotions in a way.

Both partners want some quality, certain equality in a relationship. It is often compared to a two-wheeler, where both the wheels need to be balanced for the vehicle to move smoothly. However, that is an intellectual proposition, albeit a convincing one. In reality, men and women are built differently: psychologically, emotionally, and physiologically.

I would like to share with you the four truths of marriage.

It is not possible to let go of expectations

People tell you to accept the other person, do not expect too much, be more accommodating and so on. If you can adopt it fully, you may have greater peace of mind. However, in reality, both the partners need to accept that they have certain expectations from each other. When you give your heart, body and soul to an individual, it is natural that you expect something similar in kind.

If you completely let go off your expectations, you are making one big compromise. You may still have a relationship, but it will be devoid of fulfillment and joy. Denial of your needs, curbing your desires, non-expression of your love is not letting go of expectations.

One partner is always more attached than the other

Both the man and the woman may have similar, if not the same education, salary, and background, but one person tends to be more attached to the other. They may even love each other differently. They say, "When you love somebody, set them free. If they come back, they are yours. If they don't, they never were". Well, you love your body, but you do not set it free to do whatever it pleases; or you love your dog, but you take him out on a leash. Because when you love, you care naturally.

Out of such care arises concern and caution. Surely, both the partners must give each other personal space but you cannot accept everything, unless you have no other option, in the name of setting the other person free. Rather than following some lofty philosophy, it will help a great deal to be practical.

One is always more expressive than the other

One partner tends to be more expressive than the other. Often the more expressive one wants the other person to speak up, to express more, to share better, to speak their mind. They feel that their partner doesn't communicate, that he doesn't share or that she doesn't appreciate. For instance, the wife dresses up, expecting her husband to at least offer a complement.

He loves to see her look so gorgeous, but he is not expressive. He may simply not utter even a word. "How do I look?" the wife may ask to solicit a response. A few occasions and meltdowns later, the husband may start to offer a customary compliment. But the truth is, if it is not in his genes, if he is not the expressive type, his fundamental behavior is unlikely to change.

A functional relationship is not about perfection

Perfection is a subjective term, a relative notion, a matter of perspective, of opinion. You do not work in a perfect environment, you do not live in a perfect world, you do not eat the perfect food, and, dare I say it, you are not perfect either. How reasonable is it then to expect a perfect relationship? Marriage is about growing together, being together, exploring together, working together, loving together, and crying together.

It is all about togetherness. Let us say, for argument's sake, you were 30-years-old when you got married and today you are 33-years-old. Do you know what ticks you, what motivates you, provokes you, puts you off, turns you on? Do you absolutely know yourself? Like 100 percent? Probably not. If you could not know yourself completely in 30 years, how can you possibly expect your partner to know all about you in three? Until you understand each other, a perfect relationship remains a distant dream.

On a lighter note, let me roll the scroll out of Mulla Nasruddin's life for you:

"In my 30 years of marriage, we have never had an argument," said Mulla with a sense of pride.

"I don't believe you! How come?" asked his friend.

"Well, whenever she is right, I admit it. So there are no arguments."

"But what about the times when you are right and she is wrong?"

"Oh, such a situation hasn't come up yet," replied Mulla in a matter-of-fact tone.

Most may appreciate Mulla's spirits, but many more live like Mulla's wife. They believe they are right, they know better, and are better. Marriage is not all about being right, it is not a competition; it is a lot about just being, and being there for each other. That should be the primary basis of your analysis; whether your partner is there for you when you need him and vice-versa. If you are not there for each other, you are not married.

When to Move Out of a Relationship?

Sometimes you grow out of a relationship; there is no more joy or attraction. It's time to move on.

Had life been black and white, decision making would be a great deal easier. That is not always the case though. Sometimes relationships can be really confusing. Your partner is good with you one moment and terrible the next. He makes promises igniting a hope in you and before you know it, he is back to square one. You are made to ride an emotional roller coaster.

You make yourself strong to move out of the relationship, but just when you are about to shut the door, a spate of good incidents force you to think otherwise. So when should you really move out of any intimate relationship, be it a marriage or any other? When two people come together, a new entity is born, called a relationship. Think of your relationship as an independent entity, like a joint bank account if you will. Whether you withdraw money or deposit it, whether you lose your ATM card or use the overdraft facility, whether you gain interest or pay in instalments, all transactions have an impact on your account, regardless of who of the two does the transactions.

Similarly, every action of yours or your partner's makes a difference to the relationship – positive or negative. To better understand my viewpoint, remind yourself that a relationship is a third person. It is not what you are getting from your partner, but from your relationship. It is mutual ownership. I am going to list the three types of undesirable relationships for you:

The Abusive One

This one is a no brainer. It is relatively easy to make a decision either way. It is not uncommon to end up in an abusive relationship. If your partner is the abusive type, no matter what, exit, move out. It is unlikely that his nature is going to change. It is highly improbable for that relationship to ever get better. There can never be a reason for abuse nor any justification. If you have children and you are thinking of putting up with abuse for their welfare, it is a mistake.

They will emerge stronger and as better human beings living in a peaceful environment. It is better to have a loving and caring family with a single parent than a loathing one with both. If you cannot move out because you are not financially independent, you must gather your inner strength, explore your options and gain the necessary independence. No doubt, you may end up with drastic changes in your lifestyle, your standard of living may go down, but your quality of life will improve significantly.

The Pitiful One

This one is a common scenario. In this type, there is a fundamental mismatch in partners' viewpoints, preferences, likings, and so forth. One partner tends to be weaker than the other. The weaker one is often more attached to the relationship. They both recognize that the weaker one needs to change. He tries to mend his ways sincerely, but without much success. It is hard to pinpoint whether he is unable to change due to lack of discipline or capability.

One of them has some fulfillment out of their marriage, and barely any for the other. There is no physical abuse in the relationship, perhaps only emotional abuse in the form of unkept promises, unmet expectations, and unfulfilled desires. Such promises, expectations and desires that were made and agreed upon mutually, but one partner is unable to match up. The stronger one may not move out because he pities the weaker one.

They keep telling themselves that the other person is trying to change. The fact is that you cannot be in love with someone out of pity. You can be caring, loving, concerned, but not in love.

So, should you stay put or call it quits when a relationship is an average one, non-abusive but unfulfilling? The truth is, it is you alone who can make that decision. Do not seek external opinions or affirmations. You sit down in peace and jot down what is important to you. For example, is money more important to you than love, your own fulfillment or having both parents for your children? Make a list based on what matters to you and arrive at a decision accordingly. If you do move out, make sure you take your time before getting into another relationship.

I have often seen people repeating patterns in their relationships. They repeatedly make similar choices ending up in similar relationships. Spend time with yourself in solitude. If you want to make the existing relationship work, or you just cannot call it quits, you are left with only one choice: accept your partner exactly the way he is. You have tried to change him and he has tried to change himself, but it has not worked. Acceptance will give you peace.

The Insignificant One

This kind of relationship is even more complicated. In this, there is nothing seriously lacking in your partner or in the relationship for that matter. You both are doing well in your respective careers. However, the relationship has become insignificant in your life. The charm died long ago and the feeling of fulfillment has disappeared. It has truly become like a bank account – transactional. You cannot pinpoint your finger at one thing. Nothing is amiss, but nothing is left in the relationship either.

Your bedroom conversations sound like boardroom meetings; they are all about planning and practicality, reporting and reviewing, decisions and directions. In other words, boardroom has become bored-room.

This is one of the top causes that prompts individuals to go outside their marriage or relationship for flings and other alliances. They have grown tired of eating bland food, day in and day out. Sometimes such flirting takes a serious turn transforming into an affair. The one who discovers and revives love and laughter in his life, decides to move on.

At this point, the other partner feels betrayed. Before they move out, the relationship shifts to type two: the pitiful type. The infidel is no longer attached to the existing relationship and tries to love the partner out of pity. He cannot punish the partner because the other person has not done anything wrong. But loving out of pity does not and cannot continue for long. And before they know it, they end up on the two different poles.

However, if the two partners remain sincere, it is possible to restore harmony and love; in fact, it is easier because a certain degree of care and understanding is already there. Find and play on that common ground; not of responsibilities, but of joy, fun, living, and loving.

Sit down like adults and work it out. Working out can be more pleasant than moving out, giving better than giving up, growing together better than growing out. Discover your own truth, find your own way, chalk out your own path, the one where there is room for two to move together.

The Path of Personal Fulfillment

Our happiness depends a great deal on a sense of personal fulfillment and that, in turn, depends on pursuing what matters to us.

Have you ever wondered about your life? Like, where are you going, what are you doing or why are you living the way you are? I think at some point in time, everyone does. If you sit down in peace and reflect on these questions, two sides of you will emerge and argue their point like two lawyers do before a judge.

One side of you will say: stop complaining, you are good, you are happy, all is well, this is how life is supposed to be, stop dreaming because you have things to take care of, you have responsibilities, you don't have that talent, you don't have this skill, you don't have enough time, you don't have the resources, and so on.

The other side, however, will try to motivate you. It will talk to you and say, "But such-and-such person has done it, so-and-so started with no resources, of course you can do it too, what is the worst that can happen, at least you should try, you have the potential, the skills and the talent, you must put aside your fears," and so forth.

In the middle of these two eternal arguers is you— the judge. Whenever you want to do anything different in life, each time you want to embark on a new journey, a side of you will vehemently oppose you and will try its best to convince you that you are better off where you are. It wants to make you timid and complacent. At that moment, it will help to remember that anybody who has ever done anything significant in his or her life chose to ignore the arguments of this side.

My focus in this section is not to prod you in acting upon something you may have long wanted to do. Instead, it is to ask you an important question.

But, before I do that, allow me to give you some more food for thought.

If you care to observe, just look at the customers in a cafe, or diners in a restaurant, passengers at a train station, at the airport, your colleagues at work, or friends at a party. Anywhere and everywhere, you will notice that people are trying hard to do one thing: to be happy. Most of us are doing everything we can to somehow always feel happy. Happiness, however, comes in various shades; none of which is permanent.

The sky isn't always blue, the season isn't always spring. You don't always wear yellow or eat pasta every day because eventually it will become boring. Our happiness is not absolute; it is not solely dependent on the object of pleasure, but on our state of mind too. You will enjoy something as long as you are not bored. To avoid boredom, people socialize, shop, dine out, watch TV, do something different.

These activities are good, maybe even desirable, but they don't necessarily make us better human beings. Millions of people take birth and millions die every year. Struggling from one day to the next, with no spiritual or emotional growth, most go exactly as they had come. Clearly, this is not everyone's story though. There have been the likes of Einstein, Voltaire, Aristotle, Mozart and Rembrandt who bestowed upon us priceless scientific, philosophical, spiritual and artistic treasures. And countless more who were no lesser geniuses remained veiled behind the curtains of obscurity.

Irrespective of the fact whether these talented ones were famous or not, rich or struggling, they led their life in a certain state of flow, a trance like state, a state where their happiness or sense of fulfillment wasn't dependent on how the world saw them. They were not necessarily born experts, but they worked very hard to explore, nurture and polish their talents. In fact, they devoted their entire life to just the thing that mattered to them the most.

Scientists and researchers, in scores of studies, have long proven beyond any doubt that practice alone makes champions in any field. Whether it is music, chess, meditation, writing, painting, programming, or anything else, if you put in an effort of 10,000 hours, you will become an expert in that

field. Or, in other words, if you invest three hours on a daily basis for 10 years, you will reach the pinnacle of that skill.

The clock is ticking and probably 20, 30, 40, 50 or more years of your life have already gone by. Maybe you are satisfied with how your life has turned out or maybe you wanted to do or be something else. Well, it is never too late to start. Let me ask you the most important question. On what will you devote the next 10 years of your life? Where are you going to invest the next 10,000 hours? That is all it takes to be great at whatever you fancy.

The first 1,000 hours are going to be hard and even boring at times, but if you persist you will unlock your genius and expose a creative side of you that will surprise even you and everyone around. As you progress, eventually, you will become one with the object of learning and that leads to an everlasting state of bliss.

From the rainbow of happiness, where the shades are diverse and temporary, you then move to pure white happiness: pristine, all-embracing, and independent. So are you going to keep living like you have always lived or are you going to find your mojo by devoting 10 years to learning something you had always wanted to?

Once you start to enjoy the process of learning or improvement, 10 years will pass in a blink, beautifully.

This is the path of perfection, of greatness, of personal fulfillment. In what will you find yours? Pick something and go for it.

What Is the Meaning of Life?

You can't find your life's meaning in religions or rituals, but in the deepest recess of your own heart.

Buddha, the ever graceful, had just finished a discourse when a seeker approached him.

"Is it true that there is no soul?" he asked.

"Yes, it is," Buddha murmured softly.

His disciples were happy to hear the answer. The sage knew everything, they thought.

The next day, another visitor posed a similar question.

"I've heard that there exists in everyone an eternal element called soul. Is it true?"

"Yes, my dear, it is true. Some also call it consciousness."

"But, soul is different from consciousness," he argued.

"Indeed," Buddha agreed.

His disciples looked at him and at each other in complete disbelief. The reply today was the exact opposite of what they had heard just the day before. Even though confused as ever, they dared not to question the master.

A couple of days later, yet another devotee, from afar, came to pay homage.

"I believe it is not certain if the soul really exists," he said.

"You are right. It is not certain," Buddha replied.

The man left contented but the monks felt otherwise. They urged Ananda, one of Buddha's chief disciples, to question the sage.

"Why, O Venerable One," said Ananda, "did you give three different answers to the same question? It is bothering us."

"My spiritual sons," said Buddha, "they were not ready for my answers. They were not even looking for an answer. They were merely looking for a confirmation to what they thought they already knew."

What happens when someone gives us an answer contradictory to our understanding? Most of us reject it or go back to what we know to make sense of the conflicting view. Very few, the rare few, bare themselves to reflect on the new answers to arrive at a deeper insight.

The purpose of any austerity or penance is self-purification, so we may become more compassionate, loving, and humble. Of course, life can have a meaning; I just don't buy into a universal meaning or purpose applicable to all and sundry. No panacea, no pansophy. What is even the "meaning" of meaning? Not everyone experiences bliss and peace in meditation, in rituals or in pursuit of an inner calling. The meaning of life is the one you deduce from it. Its purpose is the one you assign to it.

A doctor's meaning of life could be treating patients, a general's could be protecting the borders and a soldier's could be combating the enemy. Likewise, a painter's meaning of life could be in art, a musician's could be in melody just like a mother's could be in her child. If Buddha's meaning was in meditation, Einstein's was in Theory of Relativity, Steve Job's was in Apple. I see little difference.

Everything I state is only my view and not the universal view. Swami has no absolute answers. Do we not say to children that tooth fairy exists, that Santa exists? Do we not tell them that they are a gift from God rather than saying that they were born out of a sexual act? And later, when they grow up, do we not give them the real answers?

Why? Because you care about them. You care about what and how much they can handle. Not everyone is ready to hear the truth, let alone practice it. Physical age or bookish knowledge has no correlation to one's readiness. If you are willing to listen, nature is ceaselessly offering answers to your questions. The appeal of an answer is not dependent on the answer itself but on the mind-set of the questioner. Similarly, the meaning of life is not so much about the meaning itself as much as it is about the one on the quest for it.

A German approached Srila Prabhupada, the sweet and simple saint and the founder of the ISKCON.

"Why am I always sad and depressed?" he asked. "Why must I suffer?"

"Because," said Prabhupada, "you are a rascal. You did a lot of bad karma in your past life and now you are paying the price."

Many will frown at this seemingly uncompassionate response, but this seeker immediately fell at Prabhupada's feet and became his disciple. It worked for him. He said he got the answer he had been long searching. Go figure.

As for the question, does God exist? Of course. What is other than God? Only God exists. But that discussion is for another time.

"How old are you really?" a man asked Mulla Nasruddin.

"I am 42-years-old."

"How can that be? Four years ago too you had said you were 42!"

"That is right," replied Mulla. "I always stand by what I say."

Consistency of beliefs is burdensome. How will you experience the beauty and depth of the ocean without undocking your ship? Give yourself room to learn, to play, to explore, to experience, to be. Come anew. Holding on to a belief may be comforting, compelling, even energizing, but letting

go is liberating. It's okay to prefer comfort over liberation if you so wish, it's a question of choice, a matter of temperament. Take your pick.

A Lost World

It is a lost world, too complicated. Chalk out your own path if you don't want to lose your way.

Where was a traveller who had to pass through the woods to get to another town. While on his journey, he lost his way in the jungle. He navigated in all the directions, but found himself in no better position. Each time he thought he was getting somewhere, he found himself deeper in the woods. Confused and confounded, he went through a series of emotions. He prayed, cried, cursed, and rested. Another few hours passed and shadows became long. The sun was beginning to hide behind the trees. The lost traveller got scared and worried thinking about spending the night in the jungle. He was thirsty and tired.

In the hope of finding his way, he continued to range the forest without success. His anxiety was getting worse. Just when he thought he would never get out, he saw a man sitting under a tree. His joy knew no bounds, his anxiety turned into excitement. He ran to the man.

"Oh my God, oh my God! You are God sent! I am so glad to find you here," he said in one breath. "I've been wandering since morning. I am lost. I thought I would never be able to see any town ever again, I thought some wild animal would eat me alive tonight. You are my savior. You don't know what it means to me to see you here." Tears of relief streamed down his cheeks.

"It doesn't matter where you are headed," he spoke further, "please take me with you." He was done crying now. He was overjoyed and relieved.

The other man just chuckled. He went quiet for a few seconds before saying, "I'm equally relieved to see you, for I'm lost as well, but after seeing you, I'm not as scared now. Strangely, I'm not feeling lost anymore."

They both laughed out loud. Tears welled up again to release the pent-up emotions and anxiety.

"Oddly enough, me neither. I'm feeling much better too," said the lost traveller and he sat down next to the man.

This is a lost world. The funny thing is, when two people are lost, they feel it less; when a group is lost, it does not consider itself misplaced at all. There is a sense of consolation, a feeling that you are not alone. Such a feeling does not help you in finding your path, it does not assist you in any way, but you feel comforted. After all, there must be a reason why others are doing what they are, they must have it figured out, they must have thought of it all. Thoughts like these offer you a false sense of security. The truth is, they are as lost as you. In fact, you were not lost earlier, you were trying to find a way, you knew where you wanted to go, but now, you are really lost. You ask me why? Because with all the lost people around you, you have accepted this to be the norm; you may have begun to believe that this is the way.

This is how faiths are built and passed on, from one generation to the other, from one person to the next, almost like the torch relay. The person forwarding the light to you never saw the finishing line. He simply gave you the torch because either his time was up or he was tired. He passed it on as soon as you were within his sight. The only difference between passing on a belief system versus the torch is that a relay race does have a finishing line.

What if you broke the rules? What if you did not pass on the torch, or even better, what if you did not take the torch, but ran towards the finish line yourself, on your own, based on your own conviction? You can never lose your way if you are paving a new one.

Where roads are made, I lose my way.

In the wide water, in the blue sky there is no line of a track.

The pathway is hidden by the birds' wings, by the starfires, by the flowers of the wayfaring seasons.

And I ask my heart if its blood carries the wisdom of the unseen way.

– Rabindranath Tagore, "VI," *Fruit-Gathering*

When you pursue what matters to you, the end result may or may not be what you desire, but it will leave you a better, stronger, wiser, happier person. You will not feel lost, you will not feel tired, and there will be no anxiety. In the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail."

Three Most Important Questions

If you asked yourself these questions, you might be living your life a bit differently.

Who is the most important person? What is the most important time? What is the most important karma? Once upon a time, a king woke up in the morning with these three questions on his mind. In the royal court, he repeated the questions to his ministers and other courtiers. Some said the king was the most important person, the time of one's death was the most important time, and serving one's religion was the most worthwhile karma. Many others had different answers like one's child or one's parent was the most important person, the time of birth was the most important time and charity was the most important karma. Some said God was the most important person, many said it was the farmer, some replied it was the soldier, and so on and so forth.

The king wasn't satisfied with the responses. The three questions were put to his subjects too but no one could provide a satisfactory answer. Finally, his chief minister suggested that the king should visit a sage who lived on the top of a mountain. Promptly, the arrangements were made and the king was on his way with his entourage. It was a steep climb and a few hours later he found himself outside the cave of the yogi. As was the custom, he left his sword outside the door, prostrated before the sage and posed his questions. In response, the sage took him to the edge of a cliff, a nearby high point overlooking the entire kingdom. The king was looking at his vast dominion and feeling good about his life thus far when he was interrupted by a voice behind him.

"Turn around," it said.

The king turned towards the voice and saw the sage pointing the sword at the king's heart, just a few millimeters away.

"O king!" the sage continued, "do you know now, who is the most important person, what is the most important time and what is the most important karma?"

The king was startled. After his heart skipped a beat, a calm feeling swept over his entire being and his eyes twinkled. He bowed as much in reverence as affirmation. The sage handed back the sword. The king expressed his gratitude and returned to his palace.

His courtiers asked him the next day if he got a satisfactory answer and if so, they were quite eager to know as well, they said.

"Yes," said the king. "The sage answered all the three questions in an instant. Just when I was in awe looking at my colossal kingdom from the edge, I realized the most worthwhile karma for me was to continue to love and care for my subjects. I am a king because of my subjects, I realized. And then the sage appeared with my sword in his hand. I was a few moments away from death. I realized the most important time is 'now'. At that moment, my past didn't matter and I had no future. Now was the only moment I had, it is the only time I have, and it will be the only time I'll ever have."

The king went quiet in reflection. A minute ticked by.

"And Your Majesty," the minister said, "who is the most important person?"

"You."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. But not *you*."

"Your wisdom is beyond my grasp, Your Grace."

"The most important person is the person you are with," the king clarified. "Therefore, you are the most important person right now."

When I first came across this story by Leo Tolstoy, I thought only if one could remember these answers, the major aspects of their life would undergo an automatic transformation. The person you are with 'now' is the most important person. When you give your sole attention to the person you are dealing with, you boost their self esteem, you make them feel important, they feel cared and respected. All the other positive emotions sprout naturally. And undoubtedly, 'now' is the most important time, the most important moment. This is the only moment we can act in. In essence, this is the principle of mindfulness – to give your attention to the present moment.

To be able to love, to be able to care, is the most important karma. It's the most worthwhile thing you can do with yourself, with others, with your time, with your life. When you are with yourself, love yourself; when you are with someone else, give them your undivided attention. You will accomplish lot more in lot less.

Lastly, what is the most important feeling? Is it success? Is it feeling in control? Being in love? To be loved? Is it to feel important? No, not in my world. The most important feeling, in my view, is to feel contented. When you are contented, you feel strong, you feel peaceful, you overflow with love and compassion, you sleep in peace, you wake up happy, all your struggles disappear and everything looks in place. To quote Shakespeare:

*And this our life, exempt from public haunt,
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
Sermons in stones, and good in everything.*

When you are with yourself, you are the most important person; don't devote your thoughts and energy to meaningless grudges of the past. Negative thoughts have never propelled anyone into positivity. Go on now! Be with the person you are with, doing the most important karma.

Living a Life of Dreams

A life of peace and meaning is far more precious than an exquisite symbol of death. Now is the time to live.

I hope you know that more than the external factors, it is you who stops yourself from living; living the life of your dreams. A lot of people are afraid of saying "yes" to life. And why are they scared of opening up, to spread their wings, to scan new horizons? After all, who in their right mind would say no to joy, bliss and happiness? Do you know why?

It is so mainly because from the early childhood we had to seek external affirmations, there was always someone around who would need to approve our actions, someone whose permission was necessary: parents at home, teachers at school, bosses at work, friends in the society, governments, organizations, religious authorities... you name it.

Not only are we brought up in a conditioned environment, but it is conditional too. Before you can have what you want, there is some condition you are expected to fulfill. Consider the following usual conversations most people go through in their lives: It is between a child and a parent.

"Can I have a candy?"

"Finish your dinner first!"

"Can I play?"

"After you finish your homework."

"Can I watch TV?"

"Clean up your room first."

"Go to sleep now!"

"Okay, I'm going to bed."

"Make sure you brush your teeth first."

"Can I take a day off from school today?"

"NO!"

Can I this, can I that, can I here, can I there, can I now, can I later, and on and on... You fill in your own memories.

Now another conversation between an employee and his boss:

"Is it okay if I leave an hour early today?"

"Today? Are you serious?"

"I am planning to go on a family vacation next month."

"Next month? You know it is the busiest time of the year."

During your performance appraisal: "Your performance is good, but you could improve in some areas. Congratulations, you get the maximum raise. Three percent."

"Thank you." *The inflation rate is nine percent* you say to yourself in your head.

"Can I ask you a question please?", "I'm sorry for not meeting the project deadline.", "Thank you so much...", and so on and so forth. You learn to utilize these golden words in a conditional environment. You are treated like a child in a grown-up's body.

Imagine the nature of most conversations between two partners, with other family members, with your co-workers, other people in the society, or

with your accountant. Simple living made reasonably, if not unnecessarily, complex. And this is intelligence?

There is a difference between being childlike and being treated like a child. In a way, if you do not start living for yourself, this world will never let you graduate from your school. It will treat you as a child forever telling you what is good or bad for you, feeding you with what it thinks is right for you. I hope you have had the time to reflect on how precious your life is. The difference between life and death is just that one breath, just one moment. You inhale but do not exhale, that is death. You exhale and do not inhale again, that is death too.

All those infinite possibilities you could be exploring, flying several 1000 feet up from the ground or being six feet under, it mostly depends on that one moment, between breathing versus not-breathing. If you are waiting for the work to finish, if you simply have to tick off a few items before you start being yourself, I am afraid such a moment will never come. I am not suggesting you run away from your responsibilities, but if saying yes to life is your priority, there are opportunities waiting for you. Now is the time to live, the moment to enjoy.

Mulla Nasruddin went to the funeral of a rich man with his friend.

"Look at that coffin, it is made from sandalwood!" the friend exclaimed, "and they have spent 10,000 gold coins on the decorations. See his dress, it is made from hand-woven silk! They are putting precious stones, gems and pearls next to him. The tombstone is made from exquisite marble."

"Wow!" exclaimed Mulla, "now, that's life!"

Do not deprive yourself of the joys just because you are not fulfilling certain conditions others have placed on you. As long as you are not hurting anyone, you are good. Live. Do what you have always wanted to do, be what you have always wished to. Give yourself a chance, do not be so hard on yourself, give it a try. Now is the perfect time, for perfection is simply a perspective, and 'now' the only real moment.

Say yes to life. Break free.

Bottled Up?

If you keep your emotions bottled up, you become increasingly restless and bitter. Learn to empty yourself.

Sometimes shouting in anger can be relieving, it lets you release a lot of clogged up emotions. One fit of rage and a lot of unused stuff gets flushed. But when you shout in anger, it also pains the other person and certainly affects the quality of your relationship adversely. So, it is not a viable option. Plus, since it is associated with the emotion of anger, it leaves you weaker, maybe even guilty afterwards. Imagine if you could shout without being angry. Sounds silly? Read on, your opinion may change by the time you get to the end of this chapter.

In the name of decency and etiquette, conditioned by religion, our society does not really allow free expression. As long as what you express fits in their operating model, it is good. If you make diversions, it starts to distance itself from you. Should you make a radical move, it rejects you completely. Socrates had to drink poison, Christ was crucified, Aristotle managed to escape. We need not even go that far. You shout at your boss and you get the pink slip, you shout at the referee on the soccer ground and you get the red card. Any expression that does not meet their approval, society tries to kill it.

Physical activities— be it sports, shopping, working out in the gym, even the act of making love – they all give you an outlet; a tiny window of opportunity to freely let go of yourself. You can shout at the top of your voice in a sports stadium or when you are lifting heavy weights, and so forth. Immediately thereafter, you feel calm and relaxed like the landscape after a downpour – green, fresh and new.

All intellectual activities give you either an occupation or an outlet. There are people who write to corporations, governments with their

opinions ranging from world hunger to leaking washroom taps. They know well their letters may never be read, but it provides them an outlet, and that is the key. What if there was a way to flush out every undesirable emotion out of your system?

Well, there are many. Some of you are like those sealed, but shaken up bottles of carbonated water. There is a storm inside, but looks deceptively calm from the outside.

On the other hand, take a look at children. They can just shout and cry, offload their emotions and be happy again the next moment. The vital difference is that they are not shouting at anyone; they are just shouting. They are not yet bound by the laws of the society. Considering them immature, people are willing to put up with their tantrums. An adult on the other hand throws mental tantrums, all in his mind. They cannot just shout; they need to "shout at".

Let me get to the crux of the matter now. Go find an isolated place where you can shout. Yes, shout, without any inhibitions. A place where you can just go loud without worrying whether anybody is listening. Shout really loud.

Shout till you feel all that is bottled up in you is released; years and years of suppressed emotions. Perhaps you had moments when you were wronged and you wanted to cry, but you could not; you lost a loved one, but you could not express your loss; moments when you were scared, but you had to put on a brave face; you were let down, but you thought you were unaffected; you may have sacrificed your ambitions, goals and preferences for the sake of your family and friends.

There is a lot of dormant stuff that is making you feel heavy. It is clogged up in you. Release it. So shout till the tears start rolling down. You will feel light like never before.

Feel it. Just look within yourself. How much stuff are you carrying in you? Most of it is not by choice, you are just unaware how to get it out of your system. People are meditating, they are exercising, they are playing, they are trying, they want to feel light, they want to be happy, they want to

experience peace. Ever seen the look on a toddler's face when they are sleeping or smiling? They are good at emptying themselves.

Empty yourself.

Vent it before it bursts you. If you have a positive emotion, give it an outlet and it will grow; like one candle lighting the others. You have a negative emotion? Give it an outlet and it will leave you lighter.

You are a consecrated entity, worship yourself. Drop all that makes you feel unworthy of your own devotion. Do not keep it bottled up. Empty yourself.

Destiny and Free Will

If everything was predestined, then there would be no room for karma, for free will. But there is.

A common argument is, one should have faith in God. He will do the needful, things will happen only when they are destined, and so on and so forth. Does that imply everything is predestined, preordained? And if it is so, what is the need to do any karma? What is the truth: destiny or free will? There is no doubt, from where I see it, that destiny plays an important role. Before I dig deeper, let me tell you a story:

A man on his way to find a job in another town had to pass through a forest. Losing his way, he roamed helplessly and came across an old banyan tree. Its roots hung low and it canopied a wide area. He saw a fox sitting under the tree. At first, he got scared, thereafter, relieved, for, he noticed that it was lame and old. Mostly disabled, unable to hunt.

He sat there in a shady corner. He was amazed by what he saw next. He observed that birds on the tree occasionally dropped pieces of meat and the fox fed on them. That was how it survived. It dawned on the man that there was no need for him to run around, that, he too, could just take up a corner somewhere and God would provide for him.

Subsequently, he managed to navigate his way out of the forest and parked himself under a tree, outside the first village he came across. He vowed to surrender to God and only live off what was offered to him. Only that, days went by and no one offered him anything. He was starving, at the verge of collapsing.

His faith shook. Just short of completely shattering, he wondered how could God be partial? How come He provided for the fox, but not him?

While he was engrossed in his own world, he saw a *sannyasin*, a mystic, pass by. In his frail condition, he called out to the mystic. He narrated his story, his predicament, and put forth the question that bothered him. The monk chuckled, and said, "Who told you to take on the role of the fox? Are you lame or disabled? You should be the bird, working for yourself as well as providing for those who depend on you."

This anecdote has two morals: One, we cannot pick and choose roles as per our own convenience. We have to be pragmatic, realistic, honest with ourselves. And two, surrendering to God or having faith in Him does not mean we cease to make an effort. So, what role does destiny play? Let me offer you two verses from the ultimate scripture on karma yoga:

*Pañcāitāni mahābāhō kāraṇāni nibōdha mē |
Sāṅkhyē krtāntē prōktāni sid'dhayē sarvakarmaṇām ||
Adhiṣṭhānaṁ tathā kartā karaṇaṁ ca prthagvidham |
Vividhāśca prthakcēṣṭā daivaṁ caivātra pañcamam ||*

– Bhagavad Gita 18.13, 14

There are five constituents that comprise an action. The execution of a karma is not solely dependent on any one factor. Support (or approach/ motive/ influence/ environment), doer, resources, effort, and destiny are the five elements.

Interestingly, in the aforesaid verses, destiny is labeled as *daivam*, the divine grace, not *bhagya*, plain fate. The one, who puts in a sincere effort, becomes a worthy recipient of grace. Non-attainment of your goals is not always failure, but giving up may well be.

Destiny plays an important role, but it is no more than 20 percent though. If you operate in the right environment, conducive to your karma, tap into the resources required to execute your plan, stay persistent, your plans will materialize before long. No one has won a lotto without being in the possession of a ticket first, regardless of whether it was bought or gifted. This world, the whole universe, operates on an interdependent phenomenon. Every action you perform can have far reaching implications,

almost like the butterfly effect where a small change, a slight modification, in a complex system can completely alter the final outcome.

If you are serious about attaining your goal(s), you have to operate in the right environment; you cannot practice swimming in a desert. When you engage in a relentless pursuit, in a supporting environment, your chances of gaining access to the right resources increase automatically. A little is left thereafter.

A wonderful Italian devotee, an engineer by profession, asked me once, "Why is it that spirituality flourished in India? How come it is home to some of the greatest spiritual leaders in the world?"

To answer, I asked her a question in return, "Why is it that start-ups prosper in Silicon Valley? How come it is home to some of the finest tech companies in the world?"

When you make an explicit attempt to address the four elements above, the fifth one, destiny, makes way for you.

Your chances of being at the right place at the right time go up significantly.

What about those who seem to get it easy, who seem to be an exception to the guidelines above? Well, whether you want to try your luck in the tiny subset of exceptions, hoping good things will just happen, or you wish to act in the large playground of norms, working towards attracting the desirable, it is your personal choice; be sensible.

Why Do People Change?

People change as their priorities change in life. When that happens, they no longer mean what they once did.

There are many promises people make to each other, to their loved ones, to the ones they generally care about. Words they mean and intend to keep, unless they are lying through their teeth. "I care for you," "Of course, I will always love you no matter what," "Yes, we will definitely go for a vacation this year," "I promise, I will be home by seven," or "I will never get mad at you again". Often though, many are unable to keep most of their promises. Does that mean they never meant it when they were making such big claims? Not quite, actually.

Only one thing is constant in the world and that is change. This world is made up of living and non-living beings. The living change the non-living, keeping the cycle of change in motion. So, in essence, people change; not necessarily for the better or worse always, they just change. And, when they change, promises they once meant may no longer feel that way anymore. If you accept it, your life will become easier. If you want to hold someone to ransom for the promise they once made, good luck!

A couple was unhappy in their relationship. They went to their spiritual master for blessings and guidance. They narrated the state of affairs and requested their guru to show them the path. He pondered over the matter for a minute and said, "I will ask you to do two things. If you follow them religiously, harmony will be restored in your relationship."

He continued, "Firstly, always keep your promise, no matter what." the guru said.

"Secondly, never make a promise, no matter what." he concluded.

If you look around, the more intimate a relationship, the greater the chances for change leading to deterioration. That is how it works. The key is to give each other some personal space. There should be room for each other to move freely. Imagine doing ballet in Delhi's Chandni Chowk or playing soccer on London's Tottenham Court Road. Too packed. When your relationship gets crowded with expectations, it leaves no room for play.

It looks lucrative, to change the other person; it even looks possible to make the other person adjust according to you. The truth is, it is too ambitious. It is much easier to change yourself, for your own happiness, for your own good, for your own peace of mind.

I once read a beautiful quote somewhere: "Never make a decision when angry and never make a promise when happy." Golden words of wisdom they are.

Be happy.

Give or Take?

When you are prepared to give, you stand out. You shine in the play of nature, you become a worthy recipient.

If you were given a choice to take – let us say from anybody, from someone who could give you whatever you asked for – what would you say? Of course, the conscious mind, the conditioned mind, promptly comes into play and chances are, you would start evaluating the options. How much can he give? What all can he give? Why is he giving it to me? What all will I do when I get it? Who all am I going to share it with? And on and on.

Conscious mind is very calculative. It forces you to calculate everything. Emotions, however, are not based on calculations. They are spontaneous reactions. You tickle a toddler, he giggles right away. There is no calculation there. So, what all would you take if someone approached you and said that he could give you anything you wished? What if the person was only able to offer you material things? Would you say, "Give me money. A tonne of it." What next?

It is easy to prepare a list of things you would like to take. That is conditioning. But let me turn the tables for a moment. What all can you give? None; some; a lot; everything? Make two lists of what all you would like to take versus what all you are willing to give. If taking list is longer than the giving one, you are already getting what you deserve from your life – frustration and lacking. If both the lists are of equal length, you deserve a pat on the back. You know how to live a balanced life.

If your giving list is longer than the other one, you deserve honor; you must have something very special to be willing to give more than you want to take.

If the taking list has nothing in it and everything is in the giving list, you deserve obeisances. You are God walking in a human body. Think about it again – across all the religions in the world, the greatest are remembered for what they gave to the world. Everyone gets inspired from what their idol gave or even gave up. Giving creates strength; it feeds the soul. If both the lists are empty, you are in a sorry state of affairs.

There is a famous story of a Zen monk I would like to share with you:

Seisetsu, the Zen master, had a huge following. He required bigger premises for the monastery as the present one was proving too small to accommodate the growing crowd. Among his followers was a rich merchant, a well-known man called Umezu. He decided to chip in. Those were the times when an average family's annual expense would be no more than three gold coins.

Umezu took an offering to his master and said, "Here's a bag of 500 gold coins from my side. This will take care of all the construction requirements."

Seisetsu, sounding as if accepting some burden, said in a plain tone, "Okay, I will take it."

Umezu's ego was hurt. He felt the master was being rude and ungrateful in the manner he accepted the money. Just like fear and ignorance, ego and money has a peculiar and a natural relationship; the latter fuels the former.

Decided to make a point about his philanthropy and status, he mumbled, "There are 500 gold coins in that bag."

"You already told me that," Seisetsu replied coldly.

Umezu, who was only slightly hurt earlier doubting his master did not hear him initially, was now furious.

He exclaimed, "Even for a wealthy merchant, 500 gold coins is a lot of money!"

"So, do you want me to thank you for it?" Seisetsu sneered.

"Yes, you ought to," replied Umezu promptly as much as anxiously.

"Why should I?" Seisetsu scoffed, "The giver should be thankful."

It is so true, you should be truly thankful if nature chooses you as the medium to give out. Granted, the taker should be no less grateful either. Therefore, when you are acting as the giver, be thankful and when you have the recipient's hat on, again be grateful.

Ultimately, no one is giving or taking. Everyone is simply being a medium. Gratitude is a divine emotion nonetheless. It is worthy of adoption and practice. Make sure you offer it to the right one though.

A Strange World

Everyone is playing their own trumpet, beating their own drum. You can't keep everyone happy.

In a village, there was a couple who lived with their 13-year-old son. The three lived like most others in the world; the couple worked, earned money and took care of the family's needs. They had a donkey that used to add to their earnings, and no, I am not talking about the man of the house. This was a four-legged one. Once, their son fancied having a bicycle and pushed his parents to buy him a bike.

The parents, however, were not in a position to afford it, but they gave in to their son's demand and decided to sell the donkey and use the proceeds to buy the bike. The son was very happy and a little too young to be grateful; at 13, it feels that your parents owe it to you. Same like at 30, it feels like the whole world owes you something, at 50, one doesn't feel one owes anything to the world, and at 70, one is so bogged down by the burden of mental afflictions and expectations that he is done with the debits-credits of the world. So, they decide to take the donkey to the animal fair and trade him for money; so reflective of the way of the material world, like most trading whatever they can for money.

The animal fair was two villages away, almost 30 kilometers. They packed their provisions, took the donkey with them, and started walking. The four had barely walked a few kilometers when they met a group of four young men coming from the other side. One of the youth looked at the family of three with the donkey and remarked, "Look at these fools! They have a donkey with them and yet they all are walking. One of them could easily be on the donkey."

They laughed at the family and continued on their path. The family clearly heard the remark and they truly did feel foolish. The couple decided

to do something about it; the world was laughing at them. So, they asked their son to mount the monkey as he was the youngest and likely to get tired sooner. Now, everything felt in order. They continued their journey.

As they entered the next village, a group of middle-aged and young women who were on their way to the river saw them. The women started conversing with each other, parts of their conversation clearly audible. One of them was heard saying, "This is the age of *Kali*. Look at the young son! He is sitting on the donkey whereas his parents are walking. How much worse can it possibly get? If I had a son like him, I would have buried him alive."

"I just feel really sorry for the poor lady. The son is probably following his father's footsteps. From where else would he get the idea otherwise?" remarked the other one.

The couple looked at each other, almost as if holding a quiet conversation. The donkey continued walking without a clue about the family's dilemma, but the son had an idea. The young boy got off the beast, letting his mother sit on it. This arrangement naturally felt more appropriate.

Another few kilometers later, they came across a group of old ladies sitting under the shade, engaged in idle chitchat. As soon as they saw the family passing by, they made loud remarks, almost unanimously, as if rehearsed, "Look at the women of today! The poor husband and the young child are on their foot while she is riding the donkey."

"That's the problem, they don't want to work. They consider themselves queens." Another one pitched in.

The wife felt truly ashamed. She muttered to her husband that she wanted to get off the donkey and did so promptly.

They cogitated and thought it was best to let the man of the house be on the donkey. It did not feel entirely sensible, but in line with the conventions of the world. People get somewhat stressed about whether they are doing the right thing or what would others think and so forth... Nevertheless, the

man ascended the donkey and they continued their travel. No sooner did they cross the village, they were greeted by a group of strangers.

An old man in the group advised the husband seated on the donkey, "It is really sad to see your wife and son walking in this scorching heat while you are comfortably seated on this donkey. Don't be so hard on them. After all, your wife takes care of all your needs and who will be responsible if something happens to this young boy from walking in this heat?"

The man heeded to the old man's advice, and all three climbed on the donkey. It seemed like the only solution. But, how could possibly any solution emerge from listening to everyone? As they continued on their way, they saw other traders on their way to the animal fair. And one of them, in a frenzied and raged voice yelled, "Look at this indolent and vicious bunch! How cruel! They want to kill the poor animal. I hate people like them. After all, this animal helps them source food by working for them and making them money and they are rewarding him with such merciless treatment."

The lines were blurred as to who was riding who.

It is the donkey who is supposed to follow its master unquestioningly, but here his masters were playing donkey to the world.

Here ends the story. Not the moral.

Follow your heart. Not everything ought to have some meaning. Listen to only those who you know and trust. In the vain attempt to please everyone, you will end up being no one and getting nowhere. Do not be carried away in the donkey's world; you can have your own. Whether you want to ride the donkey, make it work or sell it – you decide. It is your donkey, your world.

The Successful and the 'Successfool'

What is the definition of success? Who is a successful person and what price is fair to attain success?

Everybody likes to succeed. Since eons, the tradition has been that the passing generation conditions the upcoming with their definition of success. Very often, I find that people are trying to succeed based on someone else's criteria and benchmark. Some are successful, some, full of success. Some succeed, but do not know it and as a result, they continue their toil and struggle; they are not successful, but successfools. Some get fulfilled with their success; others only get fooled by it.

If you take the average, in a class of 40 students, 2 get high distinction, 3 distinction, and 10 gets credit with 20 getting just the pass. However, 5 children miss scoring above the threshold and are given a "fail" in their mark sheets. Those who get "fail", are they not successful? Or, the 2 who got high distinction, are they successful? The 5 who failed in the class may well succeed at other endeavors. Their current grade is merely a stamp, a label, based on the criteria of some institution. While it is easy to see success vis-a-vis failure in this instance, the lines are often blurred in other streams of life.

Is divorce a failure of marriage or the partners? Is sacking an employee a failure of the employee, employer or the job? What about not getting to the top level, or failing to secure that dream job or promotion? How about not bagging that gold medal, or securing that place in the intended school? Upon careful examination, you will notice that almost all the time, you are branded "failure" because you are not good enough in the eyes of the one making the judgement – be it an organisation or an individual.

In reality, it does not matter what others think of you, especially if you have the strength of individuality and your own character. The lives of the

greatest achievers across the globe exhibit exactly that.

The most divine preachers, and, materially, some of the most successful were, at first, deemed losers by their respective societies. But that did not deter them from pursuing their own path, on their terms, based on their own criteria, setting their own benchmark. When their persistence paid off, they had numerous followers. The cattle only follow the shepherd because of the shepherd's resolve to lead the flock; when one starts following, the others follow suit.

If the shepherd loses his resolve and does not set his own success criteria, he would soon be lost in the flock of sheep. Even his loud roars will drown in the bleating of the sheep. And the herd dogs, they are only used for rounding up the sheep and not for leading them.

There is a huge communication gap between the shepherd and his sheep, absence of a common spoken language being the greatest barrier. But the strength of the shepherd's leadership, born out of determination, experience, and individuality, overcomes that obstacle easily. With a stick in his hand, a couple of whistling sounds and whispers, along with trained servile dogs, gives the shepherd the control and sovereignty to lead his pack.

Succeeding at any endeavour can be compared to drilling a hole in the wall; The driller's only focus being that hole. The drilling machine and driller's force are directed at that point on the wall with immaculate precision. The outcome is achieved in no time with focus, persistence and, importantly, the right tool. You can have the right precision, energy, and attitude, but using a spoon to drill a hole will only give you scrapings on the wall.

A focused mind is the right tool, almost like the multipurpose drill that comes with tens of accessories. A settled mind is the most capable and competent shepherd. The senses will then serve as the watch dogs.

It may sound a lot, but in reality it is not.

A mind that has turned inward with morality as the guiding light will supply you with all the other ingredients. For, your mind is the source of

each one of them. If you can exercise surrender at that, with devotion and fervor to your God, the bulk of the work is done. You are ready for success to kiss your feet and be available to you at your beck and call.

A common folly is to keep setting new goals when you get to the current one. It feels natural and normal, but that does not qualify for it being right. If you keep shifting the goal post, you will keep working for the rest of your life. Your struggle between want-to-do vs have-to-do will continue. Going on setting new material goals is merely your mind fooling you and keeping you busy.

Know what you want materially and give a portion of your life to attain that. Once that is done, consider busying yourself on things you have always wanted to do. Dedicate your life to the welfare of others or to your own spiritual attainment; both of which are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they are complementary.

Although a matter of personal opinion, it is not worthwhile to waste your whole life on material pursuits. However successful, it will be an incomplete life and a stressful one at that. Learn to strike the balance. If you are able to let go of your desires, your needs will come down accordingly. And with that, the need for material struggle will start to disappear too. I know many people who could retire and live a more meaningful, fulfilling and relaxed life. But they choose to continue with the struggle. Partly because their passionate and restless mind does not allow them to put their feet up and relax and partly because they do not know any better. Some, of course, do not want to know – "successfools!"

Treading the path of self-realization with sincerity will ignite the wildfire of transformation in you. Everything will become clear. The futility of vain efforts burns completely in that process. You will come to know success like never before. No more tides of desires in the ocean of bliss in you. No more leaking holes in the pot of your consciousness, decidedly none in your conscience. Just you, in your own world, with everything you may possibly need available at your command. Success embodied, success glorified – "successful!"

Go on, be successful. But aim for inner success this time. Once you start to enjoy the inner journey, the outer one will appear listless, lifeless, and meaningless. Know what you want and when you have it, be contented. Do not keep wanting more, it is a blunder.

The Practice of Tolerance

When you throw a stone at a tree, not only it rejects the stone, it gifts you a fruit too. Don't keep emotional stones.

The one who is not emotionally burdened finds it easy to remain in a state of bliss and peace. There exist only two types of emotions in this world: positive and negative. The positive ones make you feel stronger, better, happier and the negative ones, exactly the opposite. Emotions reveal your unmasked nature, not necessarily to others, but to yourself. For as long as one has thoughts, one will have emotions. The goal is not to lose your emotional side, but to be able to choose, at will, your desired positive emotion. As you continue to gain inner strength, ultimately, you will learn to transcend emotional reactions firmly situating yourself in love and bliss.

With careful practice, it is possible to watch your emotions, to better understand them, to channelize them, to transform them, and to discard the negative ones. It does not mean that you will never feel bad again or feel hurt ever; it simply means such emotions will not last any longer than a few moments. There is something profound you must know about emotions, both positive and negative.

The longer you hold on to them, the greater is their impact. Imagine a hot plate. If you merely touch it for a moment, you may experience only a tingling sensation. However, if you grab hold of it, it will burn your hand and may even leave an indelible mark. Similarly, if you hold onto undesirable emotions, they may cause you damage beyond repair. Of course, if you hold onto the positive ones, they will make you invincible.

The practice of tolerance is one amazing thing. Being tolerant becomes easier if you practice gratitude and positivity as well. So, here is how to do it:

1. Pick a time frame to begin with, say 40 days, or a shorter period if you wish.
2. Write a reminder for yourself about practicing tolerance and read it at least twice a day.
3. Vow to yourself that no matter what, as soon as you realize a negative emotion emerging, you are going to make every attempt to drop it. Remember, at their core, emotions, like desires, are simply lingering thoughts.
4. Promise yourself that you will not return abuse with abuse, violence with violence, hatred with hatred, or any other negative emotion with another negative one.
5. As part of your emotional transformation, while practicing tolerance, you will not react and try your utmost to maintain your state of evenness.

You can repeat the practice till it becomes your habit.

Remind yourself to be tolerant without expectations. It is tough, but doable. If you expect a kinder, better treatment because of your tolerance, it will make the practice much harder. Primarily because the other person may not even take notice. In fact, your tolerance may be mistaken for your incompetence, inability, cowardice, or anything else. At that time, you must remember that their opinions are mere reflection of their very own selves.

It happened to me recently. Someone asked me a question I did not wish to answer because I felt it was merely intellectual and I have never been a fan of holding long conversations on abstract topics. I believe in practice.

Another person concluded something else from it and shared his views. I wrote back saying that he had the right to his opinion. My response did not please him and he wrote more. I still did not want to answer so, I narrated a story. He found the story pointless and wrote more. I replied saying I exercised a conscious choice. And that is the key: it is a matter of choice. It

did not mean that he was a bad person, in fact, he was knowledgeable and a noble man. His intentions were right as were his questions. His conclusions were a product of his own experiences and intellectual framework. However, I decided to stick to my choice.

In the beginning, others' responses will affect you, but as you continue with resolve, with positive attitude, with determined awareness, it will matter less and less. Some will just not leave you alone. At that moment, exercise your choice. A little incident out of our lovely Sufi character's life:

Mulla's wife was mad at him and was shouting at the top of her voice. But the husband showed no reaction. He sat there in a corner and remained silent. She got even angrier and said all sorts of things to elicit some response. Mulla would not utter a word.

Feeling helpless and frustrated, she said, "Listen, I have told you a billion times that don't argue with me when I am fried."

"I haven't uttered a word!" Mulla murmured.

"Yes, but you are listening very aggressively."

The real test is when the other person decides to keep at you. It is the moment, the period, of keeping your calm. Give others the freedom to choose their emotions, while you maintain yours. Carry out the practice with resolve and you will love the new you.

A Life of Lies

This world is a stampede. If you don't fit in, you are either pushed or crushed. Realization is the act of stepping aside, mentally.

Once upon a time, there lived a king. Full of vanity and pride, he had an obsession for fine clothes and ornaments. He once announced a reward of one million gold coins to the one who could give him the most extraordinary piece of clothing. Many weavers, tailors and stylists approached him and showed all sorts of apparels – some were studded with precious gems and stones, many had threads of gold, some had extraordinary design, but the king was unimpressed. Two swindlers, presenting themselves as weavers from a distant kingdom, bragged about their unearthly sartorial talent.

"We can stitch you the most remarkable and unimaginable suit that no one else in the world has ever had," they said.

This got the king's attention. "What's so special about this suit?"

"Your Majesty, only those who are truthful in their lives and faithful to you will see this dress. Anyone who is dumb or unfit for their position will not see it."

"Wow! Is that really possible?"

"Yes, Your Excellency, but we have two conditions," they said, "first, we alone will dress you in private and secondly, we want two million gold coins in return because it's only once in our lifetime that we can make an outfit like this."

"Granted!" said the king excitedly.

"We'll require three weeks to make it." And they took his leave.

"Organize a royal parade in three weeks from now," the king ordered his courtiers, "I want my subjects to see the most expensive and extraordinary dress in the world. Announce it in the state so everyone can be there to see it."

Exactly three weeks later, the crooks came back for an audience with the king. They were holding a bag made from the finest silk. The king took them to his private chamber. He took his clothes off to wear the new outfit. The two charlatans pretended to take out an invisible cloak from their bag and acted as if they were dressing the king up. Half-an-hour later, they told him they were done. The king took them back to the royal court where they announced the features of the dress and asked loudly if all could see it.

The courtiers sang glories of the king and the wonderful suit he was wearing. No one wanted to look stupid, unfaithful, or unfit, so they agreed with the fake weavers that the suit indeed was the most impressive one they had ever seen.

The king bade the swindlers good-bye with a cartload of gold coins and proceeded with the royal parade. The subjects, like the courtiers, were aghast to see the king stark naked, but they dared not utter a word. There was a young child in the crowd though, too young to be diplomatic. He shouted, "Where's the suit? The emperor is naked. He's not wearing anything!"

Hearing this, the others too gained some confidence and started muttering. Before long, everyone was saying it out loud. The king realized the truth, but continued with the royal procession for he didn't want to look foolish by admitting his mistake.

This story by Hans Christian Andersen so beautifully highlights the greatest truth of our world, that is, the society expects you to lie if you are to fit in.

In the name of conforming to the norms, you are expected to be diplomatic. Being diplomatic is not just about being tactful, instead, most of the time, it is about tactfully, tastefully, coating the truth with the flavor the

listener desires. If a personal acquaintance calls you saying he wants to meet you, but you don't feel like, you are expected to make up some excuse. You are not allowed to say, "I don't want to see you." It is somewhat obligatory to lie in the name of being polite. You are more likely to say something like, "Oh, I would love to, but I've a commitment elsewhere." The funny thing is the other person knows you are not stating the truth, but they are happy to hear it as opposed to the real truth.

*Aba rahima mushkil pari, garhe dou kama,
Sanche se to jag nahin, jhuthe mile na ram.*

"Oh, what a dilemma," says the Sufi saint Raheem, "with truth I lose the world and by lying I lose God!"

Most people are not living a life, but a blatant lie. While it may not be possible to be brutally truthful at all times, it is feasible to lead a truthful life overall. If you pay attention, you will find that half the lies you say are not needed. Each time you lie, you place upon yourself a subtle burden. I have made it a point in my life to not lie. This has cost me dear as my truths frequently put off many people, but I still believe that a life tweaked by truth is better than the one enlivened by lies. It's a price I am willing to pay. Does it even matter if thousands, hundreds, or none know me or like or dislike me? No, it doesn't. My life isn't affected by how others perceive me; neither is yours if you see what I mean.

This world is like a stampede. People are going crazy. When you don't step out, you are either pushed (if you accept) or crushed (if you resist). Quietude is stepping out the crowd; it is stepping aside.

This is self-realization. It is mostly during pointless conversations, useless gossips, that people tend to lie automatically. Some people tell lies, many live lies, some even believe in their own lies; these folks may be materially rich, socially wanted, intellectually evolved, but they mostly remain insecure and restless.

By the way, I hope you are not confusing truth for morality. Truth is neither moral nor immoral. Truth just is. Morality or immorality is your

interpretation of the truth. Living the truth is simply accepting your actions and intentions and speaking the truth is stating the way you understand them. If there is no contradiction in your actions and your statements, you are practicing the truth. And, if your thoughts, actions, and words are in harmony, you are living the truth.

Truth, next to compassion and love, is the only thing I know that unfailingly gives its adopter strength and peace.

Life Is a Struggle

Is life really a big struggle or is it a matter of perspective? Read the story for an insight.

I go through anywhere between two thousand to three thousand emails every month. Ninety percent of these emails are from people who are struggling with one thing or the other. Some of them are tired of battling and resisting; they are on the crossroads, they don't know what to do, they say. In many cases, they write, life has been too hard on them. They tell me that life is a struggle and it has been like that for them ever since.

Yes, life can be hard, life can be a struggle. But then again, is it really any different for anybody else? Those who lack money think that people with money have it easy. Those with wealth and stressful businesses think others with simple nine-to-five jobs have it easier. The healthy think the wealthy are better, the wealthy think happy people are better. Yet, there are many who are healthy, wealthy and everything else you can imagine and they are still depressed; they still struggle to go through their life.

The truth is, that's what life is about. For everyone. As long as we are working towards accomplishing anything, there are going to be obstacles. Some see these obstacles as challenges and others see it as struggle. People may change, things may be different, situations may be more favorable, circumstances more pleasant, but that doesn't mean challenges will cease to exist. There will always be hurdles and I have realized that when people talk about struggle, they are mostly referring to challenges.

Whether we see a problem as an opportunity or a barrier, it is a matter of perspective, a question of mind-set, a personal choice. Here is an interesting story for you:

On a tree in his backyard, a man saw a cocoon of a butterfly. He observed it every day for the next few days. One day, he saw a tiny opening in the cocoon with a bright caterpillar inside. It was at a chrysalis stage. He observed the grub for hours and saw its struggle to come out of the swathe. Each passing day the caterpillar was coming out of the cocoon bit by bit; wings were forming on its body. The cocoon was becoming more taut and cramped for the growing pupa.

The man decided to help the butterfly. He snipped off the cocoon and out came the butterfly effortlessly. It fell straight to the ground. Its body was swollen and wings shrivelled. The man sat there expectantly to see the butterfly take off, but it never did. It crawled around helplessly with its bulbous body. Its wing never grew fully and it couldn't fly. Before long, it perished. What the man saw as struggle was nature's way of preparing the butterfly for survival.

Our struggles shape us, they define us. I am not saying that all struggles are good, but I am asking if it is really struggle that we are talking about? How does a body builder build his body? He has to undergo resistance training if he is serious about growing and chiseling his muscles. He can look at lifting weights as a struggle or a rewarding task. His state of mind will depend on his perspective. And, more importantly, the results, in turn, will depend on his mind-set.

Our nature has evolved on challenges. It will continue to stretch you based on your capabilities. You cannot reduce the magnitude of those challenges. If you have something to offer, nature will extract it from you.

We are not the center of the universe, but a tiny artefact in nature's grand scheme. But, yes, you can reduce the intensity, frequency, and the number of those challenges. How? Simplify your life. Start by de-cluttering. Once you start to simplify everything about you, never again will you look upon an adversity as struggle. I am not saying you will consider every challenge as an opportunity either. But, you won't be deterred by it.

Life may be a straight road, but it is rarely a smooth one. Certain stretches, some aspects of it may be velvety, but overall, it is topsy-turvy to keep you alive, to keep you awake. Enjoy the ride. Imagine you are

standing on the roadside and moments of life are passing by like the traffic on a freeway. Life doesn't stop for anyone; it doesn't stop to listen to complaints or compliments. Our earth or other planets don't stop rotating or revolving, not even for a moment, lest it should lose its existence. The intricate, interdependent, and fascinating play of nature never comes to a halt. Life can't afford to stop. If you want to enjoy it, you will have to learn to negotiate with it.

This life is real and transient, like the bubbles in froth. Love it, live it, before it pops.

The Question Paper of Life

Sometimes you just don't know the answer. Pause. Reflect. You may be looking at the wrong question paper.

Many people who come to me are in genuine search of a spiritual path, some form of destination. They tell me they have everything, yet something is missing in their lives. They cannot pinpoint what it is, they feel somewhat incomplete. I know that feeling. They are materially successful, physically well, emotionally good, mentally strong, yet why do they feel this void? Can something be done about it? Before I offer you my perspective, let me share a conversation I had the other day:

A sincere devotee, a genuine seeker has been in touch with me for quite a while. He is the academic dean of a large educational institution. He visited me a few weeks ago. As part of his spiritual journey, he had a list of places he wanted to visit. I told him if that gave him joy he could, but how would roaming around the outside satiate an inner quest? Narrating a profound and a beautiful story, he said:

"You know Swami, when I was studying in the eighth grade, I sat for my Math exams. I knew I wasn't prepared. I stared at the examination paper and was not surprised to see that I didn't know the answer to any of the questions; not even one. I didn't know what to do. So, I sat there and filled my answer sheet with drawings of trees, mountains, sun, meadows, figurines, cattle, and so forth. At the end of the three hours, I submitted my answer sheet and went home."

"The truth is, Swami," he added, "I made those drawings instead of solving the paper because I didn't know the answers. Had I known what to write, I wouldn't have sat there killing time. Similarly, on my spiritual quest, I've thought of all these activities, places, etc. I want to visit because

I don't know the answer. I don't know how to solve this question paper I've in front of me. So, I'm just drawing."

"I can help you solve it," I said, "but, we are looking at the wrong question paper. Even if you answer it perfectly, the real questions will remain untouched."

We both chuckled. What he said makes so much sense though. Why do people get into relationships, get married, have kids, engage in endless pursuits, lead their life as if clockwork, go around in circles, and compete in the rat race? If you enjoy it, go for it. By no means am I suggesting that you give up the world or its pleasures. In fact, live every moment to its fullest. However, most people are not living, but just getting by. They are drawing random figures because either they do not know the answer or they simply have the wrong question paper at hand.

They could be doing what they love, if not all the time, at least mostly. The fact is, a vast majority do not sit down and ask themselves what it is they want from their life; they ignore their calling, their inner voice.

Life is not about sitting in an examination hall. God is not testing you; I am confident he has better things to do. You can keep answering questions or you can take a moment to reflect, to inquire, to know, to ascertain, to understand, to be what matters to you, to do what gives you joy.

*I thought that my voyage had come to its end
at the last limit of my power,
that the path before me was closed,
that provisions were exhausted
and the time come to take shelter in a silent obscurity.
But I find that thy will knows no end in me.
And when old words die out on the tongue,
new melodies break forth from the heart;
and where the old tracks are lost,
new country is revealed with its wonders.*

- Rabindranath Tagore, "Closed Path," *Gitanjali*

Inquire. Reflect. Assimilate. Prioritize. Act. Be.

Most people do the reverse; a folly. When questions cease, answers are no longer needed. Self-realization is that state of inner quietude where everything becomes crystal clear. There remains no examination hall and no question paper. The concept of time disappears and it is just you, the original you, in peace and bliss. Do not get so busy living that you give yourself no time to breathe.

A Sky Full of Love

*Just like the sky can't always remain blue, life can't just have one color.
Like the colors in the sky, the colors of life are temporary too.*

Life is like the sky, sometimes cloudy, other times, very clouded. Depending on the time of the day, the sky offers a completely different view. At night it is full of stars and the waning or waxing moon. During the day, it is full of light. Artificial lighting of the cities makes the beautiful star-studded sky hazy. The same sky when covered with clouds hides either a bright sun or the soft moon. Clouds seem to appear from nowhere followed by rains. The same cloudy sky dislodges a hailstorm at times, while other times the very quiet, but cold snow.

If you look up, you are looking at the infinite sky. If you look straight you may be greeted by the horizon creating the illusion of the sky meeting the earth. Rain, thunder, showers, snowfall, even day and night are merely transient phases in the sky. The sky does not get affected by it. It remains infinite and blue. Moods of various seasons are allowed, if not accepted, by the sky in an unassuming and unattached fashion.

It does not lose its unsullied nature. You can move to any part of the world, the sky stays the same. Whether it is the noisy jet that is flying or the quiet trackless bird, the sky does not discriminate. There may be clouds in the sky but there is no sky in the clouds. How ideal!

Similarly, a life of purity will always be like the blue sky. If you are always aiming for something higher, a terminal point may never come just like when you are running towards the horizon, there is never a finish line. A rainbow always emerges in the clean sky and the sky is often clear and clean soon after the downpour.

When you are experiencing rainy days, take an umbrella or sit tight. Be patient, clear days are just round the corner. If you always want a clear sky, you may have to live in the normally inhabitable deserts. When life appears dark like the sky on the night of the new moon, you can settle your gaze at the glimmering stars. When sun is spewing fire, do not stare at it. Let it be certain in your mind that all the colors of the sky are only the most temporary of phases.

Your true nature, like the blue sky, is unaffected by all internal and external phenomena. If you always find it cloudy and muggy, you are merely looking at a photograph depicting that weather. Removal of that picture (read thought) from your sight will unveil a new one. It is merely because of your conditioned self that you do not experience the pleasant tropical weather all the time. When you turn inward, the sky is beautifully blue with pleasant temperature.

You can be by the seaside or at the Himalayas anytime you wish, absolutely at will. There is a microcosm in you. When you know who you really are, the clouds of ignorance and all the negative emotions dissipate promptly. Only the warmth of love, the radiance of peace, the shower of grace, the clouds of compassion, the soft moon of kindness, and forbearance of the sky remains. You remain pure, unblemished, for that is who you really are.

The dawn always follow the dusk, summers are greeted by winters, days follow nights, but, these all are ephemeral expressions of duality; expressions of the conditioned mind and an interdependent phenomena. Is light the absence of darkness, or, is darkness the absence of light? Is joy the lack of sorrow, or, is sorrow the lack of joy? Is heat the absence of cold, or, is cold the absence of heat? In essence, these are subjective characterizations and are dependent on the conditioning of an individual.

A farmer in Australia may feel pleasant at 35 degrees Celsius whereas an immigrant from Alaska may sweat at 25 degrees Celsius. While experiences of the body can't just be ignored, all things experienced by the mind can be turned into a sublime and uniform experience, a divine one. It is not that the self-realized will not feel heat or cold, he will bear both with grace. That is

only for the external phenomena; for all emotions, desires and the like, the self-realized remains unaffected, unperturbed and alike – just like the sky.

Free yourself. Know yourself. Be yourself. Realize your Self.

When Will My Bad Time End?

"Why does this always happen to me?" This is the most common question people ask when time eclipses their life, when adversities gnaw at their happiness.

Many write to me about losing their loved ones, about breaking up, about being out of job for months together. They are worried about their future; they are tired of the insecurity and instability in their lives. They have things they must take care of, they tell me. In fact, at any point in time, most of us have too much going on in our lives.

We have taken upon ourselves so many responsibilities that we can't afford any changes. Even a small change could cause big problems. We often classify people, things, circumstances, all into good or bad. So, when people are going through challenges, they generally pour their heart out and tell me how life's not fair, but in the end, they ask me two questions:

- a. Why is this happening to me?
- b. When will my bad time end?

I know what they mean, I hear what they are saying, but personally I don't think time is good or bad. Beyond this rudimentary classification, how we see what we do makes all the difference to our happiness. When what is happening to us is inconvenient, we see it as bad and when life goes according to our plans, we call it good. This is a sorry and an incomplete definition.

This duality of categorizing everything in absolutes, in good-bad, is a dangerous and an extremely limited view. Is summer good or winter bad, spring good and autumn bad? It all depends on our needs and our wants.

Those who love snowboarding wait for winters and those who want skateboarding crave for summers. I can't tell you precisely why you are

going through what you are. It may be because of your choices, your skills or simply the circumstances. But I can tell you with absolute certainty when will your bad time end.

Your bad time will end the moment you stop seeing it as bad. The "bad" will go away and time will continue to tick, for time, in its own right, is beyond classification. It never stops or ends, but keeps moving. And, it does so without any adjectives. What we often label as good or bad are simply the seasons of life, the colors of time. Every night is greeted by a new dawn and every day disappears into dusk. This is the truth of life.

Everything is impermanent, transient and interdependent. It is a passing phase. It is unreasonable, even foolish, to expect that time will always be "good". Time, like nature, like everything else in our infinite universe, moves indiscriminately. Sun doesn't say, "I will shine brighter here or lighter there because this is what people want, or because this is what I want." It just shines.

In a busy marketplace, Mulla Nasruddin sold his aging donkey to a young man for 30 dinars. The new buyer began auctioning the animal right away.

"Here's a chance of a lifetime," he hollered. "What a beautiful donkey! Quiet and hardworking! Look at his strong white teeth! Ah, the soft eyes!"

He continued to glorify the donkey with unearthly praises.

"Forty dinars!" A man shouted in the crowd.

"Forty five dinars!" Another voice countered.

"Fifty!"

"Sixty dinars!" Yet another one cried.

"Seventy!"

Mulla stood there stupefied. "How dumb of me to think it was just another donkey," he thought. "Look at how these people are desperate for

him."

"Eighty!" Someone yelled as the bidding progressed. Everyone went quiet at this point as the price was too high.

"Eighty dinars going once... 80 dinars going—"

"Hundred dinars!" Mulla roared. "I must own this magnificent creature."

Sometimes life feels ordinary, time feels bad because it's not going our way. But just when we are about to part with it, we begin to see its real value. It's the same life, it's the same donkey, but because someone else is placing a higher bid on it now, we up the ante too. Our stance changes, our priorities shift, we want it now.

Life does not know what you want. It only sees what you do. And even if it could understand what you want from it, it is too unattached, too wise, to take you seriously. Have you ever noticed how a split second flies? This is the life we dearly hold, protect, cherish, and cling to for decades. But when it leaves, it does so abruptly, even cruelly. What can we possibly expect from our world, from others, when our own life refuses to look back at us disregarding the feelings we held for it all along.

Whatever is your present, learn to be grateful and enjoy it. This is the way to take care of yourself. And, care, I may add, is a peculiar and a paradoxical sentiment. If you don't take care of yourself, it will wear you out and you will be careworn. And if you do take care, it will set you free and you will be carefree. You choose, but carefully.

Because, your life rests on your choices and your choices are based on your priorities, and they in turn, depend on what you want. Let's not hold time responsible for what is borne out of our desires and conditioning.

Know time for what it is: ever moving. Discover yourself for what you are: eternal. If time's soul is movement, yours is liberation. Beyond good and bad lies your truth.

The Greatest Spiritual Quality

What is the seed of compassion? Here's my take on the most important virtue essential to feeling compassionate.

If you were to ask me this question what is the greatest spiritual quality one can have? without a moment's hesitation, I would say compassion. Having said that, I don't deny that sometimes you may have plausible reasons to put your own interests first than be compassionate. It is not easy to always exercise compassion, but like any other virtue, this too can be learned, practiced and mastered.

However, I am not talking about compassion in this chapter. Instead, I wish to share with you another important quality. It is the seed of compassion. The greatest sages of all times, across all religions, possessed it. Even in the modern world, this quality forms the basis of all harmonious and everlasting interpersonal relationships. Before I tell you what it is, allow me to share a famous short story:

In a small village, a farmer put up a 'Puppies for Sale' sign outside his house. On a Sunday morning, a little boy knocked on his door.

"How much are they?" the young visitor asked. "I want to buy one of your puppies."

"They range between \$50-\$70."

"Please, can I at least see them for a while for this much?" And, he pulled out a five-dollar bill.

The farmer thought for a moment and said, "That's alright. There's no charge for seeing them."

He opened the door of the doghouse and called out to a dog. Out came a female dog followed by six little puppies nearly rolling down the ramp as if balls of fur. They were trying to match the strides of the mother. They quickly made their way to the fence while another puppy, noticeably smaller and slower, emerged from the shelter and limped his way to his mother.

"Can I buy that one, sir?" The boy pointed at the hobbling puppy. "I promise to pay you \$5 every month for the next 10 months."

The farmer knelt down at his side and said, "Son, you don't want that puppy. Unlike the other dogs, he will never be able to run and play with you."

"This is the puppy I want, sir." The little boy stepped back a little and began rolling up one leg of his trousers. A steel brace attached to a custom shoe ran down both sides of his leg. "Actually, I don't run too well myself and he will need someone who understands."

Nature has bestowed upon us an extraordinary emotion: empathy. Empathy is the seed of compassion. Simply put, empathy is a genuine effort to see the world from the perspective of the other person. It is to step into their shoes to see where exactly it is hurting. We have a tendency to quickly judge the other person or to make them understand our viewpoint but empathy is about being a non-judgmental listener, a receptor.

"Empathy is a respectful understanding of what others are experiencing. Instead of offering empathy, we often have a strong urge to give advice or reassurance and to explain our own position or feeling. Empathy, however, calls upon us to empty our mind and listen to others with our whole being."

Marshall Rosenberg nicely sums up empathy in the quote above. In fact, in his book on non-violent communication, he cites a beautiful poem *Words are Windows or They're Walls* by Ruth Bebermeyer:

*I feel so sentenced by your words,
I feel so judged and sent away,*

*Before I go I've got to know
Is that what you mean to say?*

*Before I rise to my defense,
Before I speak in hurt or fear,
Before I build that wall of words,
Tell me, did I really hear?*

*Words are windows, or they're walls,
They sentence us, or set us free.
When I speak and when I hear,
Let the love light shine through me.*

*There are things I need to say,
Things that mean so much to me,*

*If my words don't make me clear,
Will you help me to be free?*

*If I seemed to put you down,
If you felt I didn't care,
Try to listen through my words
To the feelings that we share.*

When you wish to empathize with someone, just listen. When you do that and do so sincerely, a little while later they'll start to make perfect sense to you. You'll begin to understand their challenges and barriers, their aches and pains. Most of us have automatic response to most things in life, but with mindfulness, you can pick and choose your emotions. When you dislike something, you can choose from anger, repulsion, empathy, compassion, indifference, or any one of the 27 other potential emotions experienced by us.

When you continue to practice a certain emotion as a conscious choice, it soon becomes your second nature. It is the reason why some people can be eternally angry, always selfish, or mostly arrogant. Or on the other hand, why some people are often kind, compassionate, or considerate. At some point in time, they had chosen these emotional responses over the others and they had done so repeatedly until it was instilled in their DNA.

Mulla Nasruddin went to a department store to buy a pullover for his wife. While he was at the checkout counter, a flash sale was announced offering 40 percent discount to customers who paid within the next 60 minutes. Soon, out of nowhere, an army of female customers rushed to the counter and Mulla found himself getting pushed and pulled in various directions.

He tried to be patient and polite, but even after one hour, he was still at the end of the line because of the wild crowd. Upset and frustrated, he stuck out his elbows and started pushing his way through all the women around.

"Don't you have any manners?" a lady yelled. "Can't you act like a gentleman?"

"No, ma'am," Mulla said loudly, "I've been acting like a gentleman for more than an hour. Now, I must act like a lady."

This was just for the smiles and not to show the other side of empathy.

You don't have to feel a certain way to act a certain way. The reverse is more practical and effective: start acting a certain way and you'll start feeling that way. Empathy, therefore, is an act before it becomes an emotion. Practice it and you'll experience it.

As they say, resolve to be tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving and tolerant with the weak and wrong. Sometime in your life, you will have been all of these.

Happiness Is a Journey

*Happiness is the path we walk. It is a matter of commitment.
In fact, happiness is a choice and not always the outcome.*

People lose their jobs, they go through divorce, they fall sick. Some are losing money and others court cases, many have been unemployed for months while some are under heavy debt. People are concerned about their future and troubled by their past. The majority out there are going through challenges at work, at home, or both. It is all about worries, worries, and more worries.

Most of us do everything we can to avoid worries because we want peace, happiness, and a life free of stresses and strains. We want a life that is smooth and has no surprises and shocks for us. We want the future to announce itself before it arrives on the doorstep of our present. We want nature to go according to our plans. The truth is, we want too many things. If you ask me, we have unreasonable expectations from life. Nevertheless, is it possible to be at peace? Is there a way to happiness? Maybe. Let me begin with a little story you may have already heard in one of my talks or elsewhere.

A king once wondered if peace could be depicted, and if so, what would it look like. He announced a grand prize to the artist who could paint the most apt picture of peace. Several artists from his empire came up with beautiful paintings. Some had drawn birds and the vast sky, others painted the calm ocean while many captured the dense forests. An artist portrayed a mother feeding her child and another, an old man sitting under a tree. Scores of other maestros brought their canvasses to life with beautiful colors.

After much deliberation, the king shortlisted two paintings, which he felt were the closest representation of peace.

One painting was of a calm lake. Perfectly still, it was surrounded by colossal green mountains. There was a blue expanse overhead with fluffy white clouds. An old tree stood quietly with its boughs extending several feet over the lake. A dry leaf was floating on the surface of the water. The king's courtiers and his subjects voted it as the perfect picture of peace.

The other painting had chaos written all over it. While this too had mountains, they were rugged and bare. The sky was dark gray with silver streaks of lightening and it was raining heavily. A mammoth waterfall was tumbling down from a tall mountain. Everyone was puzzled to see this as one of the shortlisted paintings. But then, the king asked them to look closely, to examine it more deeply.

Behind the waterfall, a young bush was growing in a fissure in the rock. There it was, sitting peacefully, in the midst of the rush of roaring water. On the bush, there was a nest where a mother bird was feeding her little ones. They were unafraid, as if in perfect peace.

The king awarded the prize to the second painting.

The king reasoned by saying, "The first painting is attractive, but it is not real. Peace doesn't mean a life devoid of adversities, troubles and challenges. Instead, it means to be surrounded by all of that and yet have faith and be calm. That is the real meaning of peace."

Most of us want the painting of our life to look like the first one, but almost always life hands us the second. The first painting is our expectation from life and the second is the reality; Peace lies in reconciliation of the two.

You can't stop the rains or the foaming waterfalls, but you can find your nest of life on the bush of faith, of acceptance, of good karma. I am reminded of a beautiful quote I read once on a Sydney restaurant wall:

"For a long time it seemed to me that life was about to begin... But there was always some obstacle in the way, something to be got through first,

some unfinished business, time still to be served, a debt to be paid. Then life would begin. At last it dawned on me that these obstacles were my life."

When the going gets tough, when life stretches you, take it gracefully. There's no point in complaining or whining. Remind yourself that it's the rainy season, that you must persist and remain focused, that when one door closes a hundred others will open. Sometimes the rainy season may last longer than expected. So what? Sometimes the door may not open soon enough. So what? This is life.

The sooner we understand and accept this truth of life, the happier we will be. On our journey, the sky won't always be blue nor the mountains green. The days won't always be sunny nor the nights starry. The oceans won't always be calm nor the rivers flooded. And, that is life.

For whatever it is worth, this is what it is: a journey of happiness, of peace.

Keep walking. With grace. With gratitude.

The Eternal Truth

All living entities are constantly working towards the same truth. It's simple and penetrating.

The other day, my eyes were tired from continuously looking at the screen for several hours at a stretch. I had been busy editing my upcoming memoir and replying to numerous emails. I could stare at the screen no longer as the words were beginning to swim in front of me. To give my eyes some rest, I drew the curtain and looked outside. It was a beautiful scene. The river was flowing gently, the mountains were green, at a distance a farmer was tilling his land, on a rock a shepherd was resting while his cattle were grazing about, the sky was clear and up in that blue expanse was a bird circling around.

My gaze followed the bird as it soared high in the sky, still flying in circles, it came down at a much lower altitude and flew high again. This went on for a good few minutes before it eventually disappeared behind a giant mountain. I looked elsewhere through my window and couldn't spot another bird but right at one corner of the glass was a cobweb and a spider was waiting at the edge of the web. It was quiet and still. Just outside the window some butterflies were flitting about.

I closed my laptop for the screen looked extremely unappealing now. An aphorism by a lesser known saint, Maluk Das, came to my mind:

*Ajgar kare na chakri, panchi kare na kam,
das maulak keh gaye, sabke data ram.*

A python doesn't serve any master and a bird doesn't go looking for work. Maluk says that one God provides for everyone.

However, I think there is more to our world than this simple, albeit soulful, statement. I sat there reflecting on the eternal truth of our existence. Whether it was the bird flying in the sky or the fluttering butterflies, the working farmer or the resting shepherd, there was one thing in common: hunger. Hunger is the eternal truth of all living entities. Other than humans or perhaps the animals tamed by us, most species rarely get to eat to their heart's content. Every morning billions of creatures step out of the safety and comfort of their shelter in search of food. They must find a prey or perish.

Hunger is also our truth; there's only one key difference between ours and theirs. No, it's not greed. Like us, animals can be greedy too. On many occasions I've seen dogs, cats and other animals devour food with insatiable desire. Nevertheless, their hunger is basic; it's elementary whereas ours is more evolved. They need to eat when famished and they need to mate when in heat. Our race, however, is starving for many other things.

Just look around and see how people are hungry for different reasons. Most are yearning for more money, many are craving for love, others are hungry for power, some for status, name and fame, and so forth. Our hunger keeps us on our toes. It keeps us going, motivates us and also makes us feel important and adequate. Be that as it may, what we want in life often arises from a sense of lacking, even insecurity. As you crave for food when you are hungry, you long for fulfillment when life fails to provide it. In seeking that fulfillment, we set goals and constantly strive and struggle to reach them, only to set more upon their attainment. This hunger is eternal.

That said, when you feel complete from within, you don't feel starved, but feel full instead. And when you are full, the urge to be more or have more disappears; the circling around stops. In the words of the noted Austrian psychologist, Alfred Adler, "One motive is common to all forms of vanity. The vain individual has created a goal that cannot be attained in this life. He wants to be more important and successful than anyone else in the world, and this goal is the direct result of his feeling of inadequacy."

This is a gem. If you reflect on it, you'll discover that once we start to believe we lack something, we begin to work towards it automatically. Most of our goals are truly determined by a sense of inadequacy. This is not good

or bad or a pessimistic view, but simply the naked truth. The sad part is we are not born this way, but we have been subtly, even if unintentionally, conditioned this way. We are conditioned to believe that we are not sufficient, that we must always strive for more. It need not be like this. Before placating your hunger, take a moment to question if you are actually hungry or whether it is a false alarm.

Mulla Nasruddin was on a cruise and he shared the table with a French gentleman.

At dinner, the Frenchman said, "Bon appétit!"

"Mulla Nasruddin!" said Mulla.

The French fellow nodded politely. The same pleasantries were exchanged at the next meal.

This went on for five days when Mulla could not take it anymore and told another traveller: "Before every meal, he tells me his name is Bon Appétit and I tell him mine. I don't understand this guy. Why does he announce his name every time?"

The fellow traveller laughed and explained to Mulla that 'bon appétit' is a French greeting that meant 'enjoy your meal'.

Nasruddin was very happy to have solved the mystery and eagerly awaited the next meal.

Surely enough, they met at dinner again. Mulla welcomed the Frenchman with a big smile and said, "Bon appétit!"

The fellow traveller smiled gently and said, "Mulla Nasruddin."

The world is looking at you and trying to copy you thinking you have it all figured out and you are doing the same looking at them. There is no real hunger beneath, just artificially fuelled fire based on superficial and arbitrary observations.

Yes, we need to survive, we need to live, we need to be comfortable and safe, but we don't have to be crazy. The carrot of desire is forever hanging in front of us and we are vainly chasing it. Snip the cord and eat the carrot. You can then sit under the shade and enjoy your life for what it is a beautiful gift. This is also an eternal truth: it's a beautiful life.

The Greatest Fear

Beyond the fear of unknown, of death, loss, of failure and rejection lies another fear, the greatest fear.

Mike Tyson once said, "I'm scared every time I go into the ring, but it's how you handle it. What you have to do is plant your feet, bite down on your mouthpiece and say, 'Let's go.'" To think about it, that's what it boils down to: "Let's go." Action is the most potent antidote to fear.

Most people spend their entire lives in fear. Many are plagued with the fear of loss, rejection, failure, and some also have the fear of getting old, but this not what I am talking about. I've observed there's a fear that easily dwarfs all these put together. And, no, I don't think the fear of death is the greatest fear. It may be the most inevitable, but we don't live our lives constantly worrying about death. Do we? Sooner or later, everyone accepts it.

In fact, I once read an interview by a doctor who worked in a hospice. He said what amazed him the most was that in his career spanning 40 years, he never saw fear or struggle in the eyes of a terminally ill patient. They lived in acceptance and their faces showcased the peace and glow of a sleeping child, especially in their final moments.

The base fear I'm alluding to is not instinctive, it's not innate, we are not born with it, it's something we learn, subtly, steadily, and slowly. It is so powerful that over a period of time it becomes a part of our nature. If life was a language and each type of fear was a letter, the one I'm referring to would be the alphabet – it contains all other fears.

It is the fear of happiness. Yes, that is our primary fear.

From the moment you are born, you are weighed on a scale of comparison. Teachers, parents, preachers, relatives, peers, friends, society, sometimes with all the good intentions, constantly remind you of your shortcomings.

We are eternally analyzing ourselves not against our own progress but against the capabilities of others. He dances better than I do, she's more intelligent, he's stronger, she's prettier, he's richer and so forth. This comparison is rarely inspiring and mostly demeaning. It makes you feel you belong to the lowest rung of the ladder. We live in a world where not effort, but attainment is rewarded.

If you score a second place and miss the first by the tiniest possible fraction, it's not good enough. You are unlikely to be congratulated for your individual performance. Instead, you are consoled that at least you got the second place. This comparison makes you feel that you are not quite there yet, that your effort wasn't good enough. This has an incriminating effect on our well-being.

With the passage of time, this feeling 'I am not good enough' prepares a perennial battleground of two opposing forces: fear and self-affirmation. On the one hand, we try to console ourselves by way of self-affirmation. We tell ourselves that I can't be that bad, at least I got the second place, I deserve some happiness too. It makes us touchy and it makes us edgy; we become averse to even constructive criticism and put up a wall of defence to protect ourselves, effectively shutting out many good things in the process.

On the other hand, the fear of happiness makes us feel that we can't possibly attain the success we used to dream of, we can't be worthy of such pleasures and joy, of so much love and care.

When good things do happen, we think it's luck, or plain fluke, that we couldn't possibly deserve this goodness. This is fear of happiness. This fear stops most people from chasing their dreams, it's the obstacle in realizing their full potential because after being put down for so long, they begin to believe that they are not the candidates for happiness.

Don't let this happen to you. It's normal to have disagreements, it's fine to even have arguments sometimes, but it's not okay to be dismissed. If you want to rise above the fear of happiness, so you may live your life to the fullest, don't allow anyone to belittle you. And if they do, they shouldn't be a part of your life. Distance yourself. Find a way.

The fear of happiness comes from not believing in yourself; it comes from taking yourself for granted. If you allow others to treat you like a dump, to take you for granted, then let me tell you, they will do just that. Observe the successful and happy people around and you will discover a common trait: they treat themselves with respect. They are not afraid of being happy and you won't be either if you learn to love yourself. Very few people enjoy happiness. Most are afraid of losing it, and in that fear, they almost always lose it.

A priest was waiting in line at a gas station just before a long weekend. The attendants were trying their best, but there were just too many cars. Finally, his turn came.

"Reverend," said the attendant, "I'm sorry about the wait. It seems as if everyone waits until the last minute to get ready for a long trip."

"Tell me about it," the priest quipped. "It's the same in my business."

What are you waiting for? Life will go on, time will continue to tick; if you don't put aside your fear of happiness now, you may never muster the courage to do it later. Mahatma Gandhi once said, "The enemy is fear. We think it is hate; but it is fear."

If you let the enemy walk over you, they will do it. Fear instils a feeling of contempt and hatred. What is worse, fear makes you either obsessively self-conscious or obnoxiously self-critical; either way, it makes you feel inadequate.

You deserve every ounce of happiness life has to offer. You ask why? The fact that you are breathing and living means the nature wants you; the universe wants you. Everyone makes mistakes, everyone screws up at some point, but it doesn't mean you are a disaster. Don't let anyone drill fear in

you by making you feel any less. To quote Jesus Christ, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone." Don't be afraid of your immense potential, your happiness. Go claim it.

Bite down on your mouthpiece and say, "Let's go."

How Did We Happen?

The question you should be asking is not what is the purpose of human life, but what is the purpose of your life?

I received an interesting email the other day. If you bypass the general tone of the message, you will find the questions worthy.

The mail said: "Despite my skepticism, I can't help but hope... That maybe you have got some answers which nobody has. So tell me without indulging in cryptic mystic hyperbole if you could (please!) How did we happen? What is the purpose of all this? What happens after we die? Please don't be shy to admit if you don't know the answers... It is okay... I will continue to search... Can you reply fast?"

Before I share with you what I replied to her, I am reminded of an anecdote. A Zen monk was sitting under a banyan tree. Coincidentally, he was pondering over exactly the same questions of birth, death and more. His master's answers couldn't satisfy him; the scriptural thought didn't appeal to him; the teachings of Buddha couldn't douse his curiosity.

Just when he thought there were no answers to his questions, a mighty gust of wind blew and the leaves started fluttering. One of the leaves could cling to the tree no longer and got detached. The wind raised it high up in the air and tossed it around before thumping it on the ground. It was as if the leaf was caught in a tornado.

"My life is like the leaf," he realized. "No matter what I want or how much I want to hold on to the tree of life, one day I'll be disconnected. This severance is not death, but the beginning of another life. And like the leaf, I will be flung around. The tornado of desires will pitch me around. There is no sense in resistance. I must go with the flow before ending up on the ground. Even then, this is not death, but the start of another life still. As I

decompose, I'll become part of earth, I'll continue to live in millions of other organisms. The cycle is eternal."

This was his realization, not necessarily mine or yours. Moving on to what I wrote to the reader:

"Even if someone gave you the most accurate answer, you still may not accept it because there is often no way to verify its validity. Everything on our origin, death and afterlife is a theory with one difference at the most – some sound more plausible than the others.

There is no heaven or hell. There is no supernatural creator. There is no universal purpose applicable to all individuals. There may even be no individual purpose because the quest for purpose is a craving of the conscious mind. Why does a sense of purpose disappear in sleep, or when one is unconscious, or in an infant? As we grow, a sense of ego, of individuality, makes us feel that life can't be meaningless. This notion of meaning is simply a pointless ramble of the conscious mind.

The brutal truth is that every being, every single entity, if anything, is merely an insignificant, dispensable and disposable aspect of nature, whose self-fulfilling purpose is to sustain itself.

The theory of evolution is the most sensible response to the question of how did we happen. But, it doesn't give us the complete picture, because it misses out on the basis of evolution – it tries to explain how we happened and not why. Why do we even take birth or why do we evolve? We do so, because, in my view, nature recycles.

If you observe closely, everything in nature is recycled, absolutely everything. The five elements of earth, water, fire, air, ether, and the innumerable compounds thereof, all entities – living or non-living, animate or inanimate – they are all subject to recycling. Everything, including our body is salvaged by nature. So does our consciousness as it finds a new home after death. Nature's only goal is survival and it accomplishes it through the eternal cycle of transformation. That's how and why we happen(ed)."

The other day, I was walking back to my hut at night and a dog was walking ahead of me. Due to the heavy rains, all sorts of creatures had appeared from nowhere (talk about creation). Inadvertently, the dog stepped on a snail. I sat down and flashed my light on the snail. It had turned into a pulp and was crushed under the weight of its own shell. The dog kept looking at me lovingly; completely oblivious to the life it just took.

I sat there for a wee bit more and tiny insects began gathering up on the dead snail. In no time, bigger insects made way into the equation and started devouring their meal. I carried on observing and it began drizzling. Meanwhile, the struggle between the insects continued, each wanting more. Soon, the soft showers turned into torrents and the smaller insects ran for cover.

A few minutes later, the larger ones fled as well under the heavy downpour and left in front of me was a gored snail. The dog too had taken shelter under the nearby roof.

The rain stopped. I waited a bit more and the insects started to return.

I looked at the dark sky, at the quiet mountains, at the roaring river. What a magnificent play of nature, I mused.

Sunlight during the day had given birth to billions of tiny creatures and a downpour of a few minutes had wiped them off the face of earth. Countless crawls out from the womb of Mother Nature and countless merge back, every moment. I prayed for the sentient beings and went back to my hut.

I've observed ants, insects, fish, snakes, scorpions, wolves, deer, bears, boar, baboons, monkeys, and humans. When it comes to nature, when it comes to the inexplicable essence I call God, there is absolutely no difference whether a dog steps on a snail or an elephant on a man. Whether a flood destroys a thousand sheep or a tsunami a thousand humans, nature makes no distinction.

Human sense of superiority or a conceited notion of being special is merely an arrogant view. It shows a lack of understanding, demonstrates an absence of compassion.

In the words of the celebrated Chinese thinker and philosopher Wu Hsin:

*How many of your questions
Have been answered,
But still
You don't have the answer?*

*Is it possible that
The answer isn't
Found in more questions?*

*Is it possible that
The answer isn't
Found in more concepts,
More thoughts?*

*Is it possible that
The answer is
Revealed in their very absence?*

– Roy Melvyn, *The Lost Writings of Wu Hsin*.

Somehow you believe that every question ought to have an answer. An absolute answer, at that. It's a vain and a childish view. The books of the wise ones contain no absolute answers. Why is the universe infinite? What will you say when your child asks you why was I born to you, O mother?

Swami can give you the answers, but they won't lead you to your truth. Rather than answering your questions, let's question your answers. Your questions are not the problem. Your answers are.

Making Dreams Come True

Why do some people succeed quicker than others? Believing in your dreams is the key.

Engrossed in his own world, dismayed and troubled, a traveller was passing through the woods. His whole life had been a struggle, he felt. No matter how hard he worked, there seemed no end to the challenges life put him through. His friends, his peers, his siblings – they all had progressed while he remained where he was. He was convinced that they were just luckier and that he was fated to slog and sweat.

Little did he know that he was passing through a magical terrain in the forest. A giant tree, too magnificent, too beautiful, too hard to resist, stood in the middle – inviting and riveting. The tree was a *Kalpataru*, a wish-fulfilling tree. He sat by the root under the dense shade to rest. Soon, he felt thirsty. "How I wish I could get a glass of cold water," he thought. Poof! A glass of cold water emerged out of thin air.

He gulped it down, but now he felt hungry too. Barely had he imagined food, a sumptuous meal appeared right in front of him. He pinched himself in utter disbelief. He thought of a comfy bed and that too materialized in no time. The traveller realized that he had hit a jackpot. It was all happening for real. He wished for a home, servants, garden, land, wealth, and everything continued to manifest in front of him.

It was starting to dawn on him that he was the master of his fate, after all; that, this tree was truly granting his wishes, that, his thoughts were actually coming true.

Afraid of losing it all, still in a sense of denial, he thought, "No, this can't be true. I don't deserve all this. I can't possibly be that lucky. This must be a dream."

Poof! Everything disappeared in a whiff. He looked around and saw the black woods. A few hours had already passed. It was getting dark; evening had set in, along with fear. "I hope there is no lion nearby or I would be eaten alive," he thought.

That moment, a lion appeared and ate him.

This parable is everyone's story. We are all passing through the woods and wondering about what life could have been or should have been. In doing so, we remain imperceptive to the magic our world already is.

You are resting under the mystical tree of life, sometimes completely unaware that it is granting you your wishes, that your dreams are coming true, that the universe is constantly listening to you. The beauty about this listener is that it's nonjudgmental. It makes no discrimination between your good desires or bad ones. Once you contemplate on something long enough, it is accepted in the fold of the cosmos and the forces of nature get to work on materializing it in your life.

Assuming your effort is sincere, the intensity of your desire and the purity of your thought are the two primary factors that will determine how long it will take before your wish is granted. By the purity of thought, I'm not referring to any skewed stance on morality, I'm simply alluding to the single-mindedness of your pursuit. If you have too many desires going at the same time, it's just too much noise. Concentrate on one thing at a time.

Most importantly, when you don't believe in something, the universe doesn't believe in it either. If you believe in your own goals, dreams, desires and hopes, the universe will too. Vedic scriptures persuasively state and logically prove that we are an exact replica of the universe.

We are the microcosm and out there is the macrocosm. Anything you wish to materialize outside, you must first learn to manifest within, with complete conviction and sincerity.

If you are willing to be patient, persistent and positive, you can accomplish pretty much anything. I have to give you a caveat though: this

law of nature doesn't work if you want a specific person in your life to be a certain way. For example, if you want love, you can have it, but it may not necessarily be from the person you wish it from. That is because they too are releasing their desires and thoughts in the macrocosm and if theirs is more intense and persistent, the universe is bound to listen to them first.

Your fears, thoughts, desires, expectations, dreams, hopes – they stem from a thought. Whatever you cling to, ultimately manifests.

Never think you are undeserving of the good in your life or you can't make it because if you start to think that, well then, you leave nature with no choice, but to believe you. Allow your dreams to materialize; give your hopes a chance over your fears; let your conviction win over your doubts.

You deserve to be happy, you deserve to live, you deserve to be here on this magical path, you deserve to celebrate life. This is not a motivational statement, this is my firm belief. This is Swami's way of life, in fact.

Do You Have Faith?

What is faith? How does a rose bloom?

Does faith have any scientific or even reasonable basis? If you truly have faith then how come worries of the future still grip you? Personally, I believe, if you want your faith to be firm then put aside any logic you have. And if you want your rational mind to be firm then put aside faith. When we try to induce reasoning in faith, we end up polluting them both.

Faith just is, God just is, nature just is, belief just is. "Why?" yields no answer when it comes to faith. Surely, we can fit explanations and theories, but they don't solve any purpose beyond a temporary stimulus. Are the stories in the *Torah*, *Quran*, *Bible* or *Bhagavatam* true? The question is does it matter to you? Faith is mostly based on what we have already taken to be true and rarely on the actual truth itself.

When faith runs deep in your being, surrendering to the Divine comes automatically. Inner peace is a natural byproduct of surrender. A child feels secure in his mother's arms because he knows that she'll protect him. It's not an intellectual idea, but an ingrained belief the child has and it is this subtle differentiation between believing you have faith and actually having it that makes all the difference to your inner peace.

I'm paraphrasing a beautiful story for you. I tried hard but couldn't locate the source of the poem cited verbatim in this anecdote.

A man, worried and paranoid, asked his enlightened master if everything would be alright in the future. "I know I should have faith, but I can't get around to let go. I am still worried. What if things don't go the way they should? Negative thoughts render me unable to enjoy my life. What if God doesn't take care of me?" he said to his master.

The master took a rosebud, gave it to the disciple and said, "Your task is to unfold the bud, keeping all the petals intact."

The disciple carefully began separating the layers of the rosebud. Soon, however, he realized it was not possible to unfold it without damaging the petals. "It's not as simple as it looked. I'm sorry but at least some petals will be damaged," he said to his master.

In reply, the master took the rosebud from him and said:

*It is only a tiny rosebud,
A flower of God's design;
But I cannot unfold the petals
With these clumsy hands of mine.*

*The secret of unfolding flowers
Is not known to such as I.
God opens this flower so sweetly,
Then in my hands they die.*

*If I cannot unfold a rosebud,
This flower of God's design,
Then how can I have the wisdom
To unfold this life of mine?*

*So I'll trust in God for leading
each moment of my day.
I will look to God for His guidance
each step of the way.*

*The pathway that lies before me,
Only God knows.
I'll trust Him to unfold the moments,
Just as He unfolds the rose.*

"How much can you plan, after all? And how much do you want to plan?" the master continued.

"Why do you want to keep everything in your hands? It is tiring. Learn to let go. Who took care of you when you were in the womb? Who fed you when you didn't even know how to speak? Who provided for you when you were too young to earn your own living? If you examine, you will find there was always someone there, a medium nature had already chosen for you. Sometimes letting go is simply reminding yourself that you have done whatever you could and now you must free yourself from the outcome or the worry."

Faith is designed to give you the confidence, the courage to lead your life with grace and conviction. It doesn't mean we can just confess and be done with our bad karma, rather, we should have the strength to do the right karma at the first place.

I don't think God will manifest to pay off your mortgage, your loans – karmic or financial, or to help you shed or gain weight. We must take responsibility of our own lives. We are the result of our desires, choices, and pursuits. Allow me to deviate from conventional wisdom by saying that faith, with all its paraphernalia and practices, is for inner strength and not to please an external God.

I don't want to please a heavenly being and beg for favors in this life or hereafter. Instead, I would give this life my best shot and let nature take its own course.

After all, if I truly have faith, shouldn't I know that God or nature's way is impartial?

Napoleon Bonaparte once said, "When you fight, fight as if everything depends on you. And when you pray, pray as if everything depends on God." This is faith in a nutshell.

Faith is supposed to complement, and not replace our actions. Ultimately, we are responsible for the choices we make. Wake up with faith in yourself

and go to sleep with faith in God.

The Two Realizations

There is nothing called a free lunch. You have to work towards what you want, you have to earn it.

To survive, thrive and live gracefully in this world, we need a bit of both worldly and spiritual wisdom. Just having worldly wisdom may help you acquire material wealth and fame, but it doesn't mean you will have peace and bliss. Having spiritual wisdom alone may mean you know right from wrong, moral from immoral, but it doesn't guarantee a materially comfortable life. With the objective to help you understand my perspective, allow me to classify wisdom into two categories: spiritual and worldly. These are the two ultimate realizations, the finest guiding principles.

I once read an anecdote in a book called *Jewish Wisdom* by Rabbi Joseph Telushkin. Reproducing it here verbatim: Nobel Prize-winning economist Milton Friedman served as an advisor to the late Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin. He once addressed the Knesset, the unicameral parliament of Israel. Soon after his speech was over, a Knesset member approached him and said, "In the *Talmud*, Hillel summarized Judaism in one sentence: 'What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor: this is the whole *Torah*."

The rest is commentary.' Could you summarize economics in one sentence?"

"Yes," replied Friedman. "There is no such thing as a free lunch."

Witty. There is probably not a crisper way to condense the spiritual and worldly wisdom in two sentences. The essence of all religions, at the core of spirituality, is not the understanding of rituals or recitation of scriptures, but the realization that we have a duty of care towards our fellow human beings and other living entities.

You may believe you are politically, financially, emotionally, or intellectually independent; you remain a part of a grand system, a minuscule entity in nature's apparatus.

Our actions have repercussions on us and those around us. It is not enough, much less fulfilling, to live just for yourself. It is obscene, in fact. If you believe in God, any god, if you wish to experience the greatest bliss, if you aim to understand your religion, if self-realization sounds worthwhile, then please know that meditation, devotion, wisdom are merely means to attain it.

The greatest realization is the understanding that by serving His creation, you are serving Him. And if you don't believe in God, you can rephrase: by serving others you are serving yourself. Don't do to others what you don't want done to you, or, in other words, do to others what you want done to you. This is the greatest spiritual principle, the ultimate insight.

Here is the greatest worldly wisdom in one sentence: there is no such thing as a free lunch. Everything comes with a price. People, relationships, organizations – all held together by the thread of self-interest. It doesn't mean everyone is selfish; like biological necessities, everyone has emotional needs too. Just like you feel good when your desires are fulfilled or expectations are met, you feel the same about the fulfillment of your emotional needs too. All your pursuits cost you something. It could be money, time, energy, health, any of these, or all of these. As long as you approach your ambition with that awareness, so long as you understand the price you are paying and are willing to pay it, you are good.

Price is just another term for consequence. If you are willing to accept the consequences of the choices you make, then you know what you are doing. Everything comes at a price doesn't mean everything has a price; some are priceless. Know the difference.

A couple stopped by a scenic lookout point while on a road-trip. It was a high vista overlooking the rocky beaches. The husband was afraid of heights while the wife was fearless. She kept going towards the edge while he forbade her.

"If you can't resist going to the edge," he said, "hand me the sandwiches then."

It's a funny story, even unreal, but not entirely untrue. Many around us choose sandwiches over loved ones. Those could be sandwiches of desires, things, ambition, money, and what have you... Once again, it's a matter of choice and every choice we make is followed by its consequence. There are no free choices, just like there is no free lunch.

Anything you wish to acquire comes at a certain price. Shop carefully. Mindfully...

A man was sitting with his friends in a local inn. After a couple of drinks, he asked his friends, "Do you love me?" "Of course, we do," they replied. "So do you know what I need?" No one answered. "If you don't know what I need then how can you say you love me?"

To love and to be loved is the most basic human need. No wonder we are attracted to people who give us attention, care about us, and love us. Yet, love also remains the greatest challenge in most relationships. Why?

A Fistful of Love is a collection of insightful, thought-provoking nuggets of wisdom appreciated by millions around the world. This book is full of humour and narratives most beautifully woven into learnings of life that will make you stop and think.

A must read.

Om Swami is a mystic living in the Himalayan foothills. He has a bachelor's degree in business and an MBA from Sydney, Australia. Prior to renunciation, he founded and ran a multi-million dollar software company successfully. He is the author of the best-seller *If Truth Be Told: A Monk's Memoir*, and a soon-to-be-released book on Kundalini.

Elevate Your Life. Transform Your World.

JAICO  BOOKS

www.jaicobooks.com

Religion & Philosophy

ISBN-13: 978-81-6495-792-1

